

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS
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Xbox One | PS4 | S
U | Virtual Reality | Mobile | PS Vita | 3DS | Retro
WOLFENSTEIN STRIKES AGAIN
How MachineGames is matching blood and fury with heart and passion
LINKING TO THE PAST
We celebrate 25 years of Zelda's SNES classic with the indie devs keeping its legacy alive
XBOX ONE X
THE NEW KING OF CONSOLES
HANDS ON WITH THE MOST POWERFUL CONSOLE EVER MADE
MARTY O'DONNELL SPEAKS
The former Halo composer reflects on his career so far
THE RISE OF CUPHEAD
How this small indie experiment became one of the biggest games of the year
HIGHLIGHTS
AGENTS OF MAYHEM
UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY
THE EVIL WITHIN 2
LAWBREAKERS
NO MAN'S SKY
MATTERFALL
SONIC MANIA
A WAY OUT
PYRE
ECHO
STREET FIGHTER V
HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE
LIFE IS STRANGE: BEFORE THE STORM
Future
ISSUE 191

Competition between consoles is good for gamers. Sure, you're probably going to need to pick a side and that means that you're going to miss out on something, which is a shame. But would your chosen platform be pushing forward with technological innovations and groundbreaking new IP if it didn't feel another platform breathing down its neck? Would Nintendo have launched the Wii? Would Sony have pursued VR? And would Microsoft now be launching the Xbox One X unless it thought it might shift the balance of the generation?

At the highest levels, money drives almost everything, but rather than leading to a conservative approach, in many cases it seems to embolden first-party game-makers to push harder. The adage that you have to spend money to make money appears to be at the heart of how our industry operates, which is refreshing. From time to time we become swamped by sequels, reboots and remasters as everyone seeks to bunker in and give themselves a little security, but then, suddenly, you'll get a console-maker break ranks and make a play for the spotlight.

It feels as if that's exactly what Microsoft is doing with the Xbox One X and its wider slate of updates and new services through to the end of the year. Whether it helps close the gap with the PS4 or not we should all be pleased, because a renewed Xbox will only encourage Sony to do bigger and bolder things too.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR





CODY =1
191
DAMND
4


PUSH START
SUBWAY

Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 191 | 17



ACCESS





FEATURES

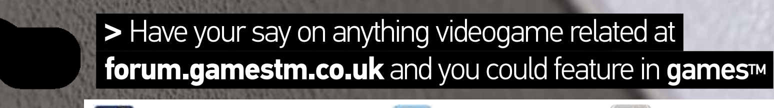
REVIEWS



FAVOURITES



RETRO











34 Feature

XBOX ONE X

Is this 4K gaming beast going to tip the balance back in favour of Microsoft?

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS IS FINDING THE BEAUTY IN BRUTALITY

→ MACHINEGAMES' JENS MATTHIES ON THE DEFIANT, DISRUPTIVE RETURN OF ONE OF GAMING'S MOST SURPRISING SERIES

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PS4, PC** | PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA** | DEVELOPER: **MACHINEGAMES** | RELEASE: **27 OCTOBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**

How is MachineGames able to so confidently craft narrative-driven, single-player shooters in an era where the general play in the market seems to be thus: go online or die? Really, it's no big secret. The studio has been so successful in an area where so many others have tried and failed because it understands storytelling; it knows how to tell a good yarn and it knows how to balance those particular demands with the requirements of good game design; MachineGames also understands how to leverage the power of the medium to create an experience that is as highly stylised and bombastic as it is nuanced and considered.

It's a difficult line to walk, striking a balance between frenetic action and a poignant narrative. Especially so in a videogame like *Wolfenstein*, one that's vehemently focused on delivering a very particular power fantasy: stalking Nazis through a twisted vision of reality – a shotgun in one hand and a futuristic laser rifle in the other, limbs flying *everywhere*. How does MachineGames manage it? Speaking with creative director Jens Matthies – who has honed his craft over the years on titles including *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, *The Darkness*, and, of course, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – the magic is drawn from staying true to your vision, executing it better than anybody else could ever reasonably expect, and knowing when to take a step back and take stock of your successes and failures.

"I think the key is to always try and create distance from your own work, so you are able to, as objectively as possible, evaluate it," says Matthies as he considers the difficulties in trying to find the connective tissue between the calm and the chaotic. "When you are trying to walk that tightrope – between what is crazy, over-the-top and what's intimate, serious, dramatic and dark – the challenge is always to be able to, as a developer, self-correct all of the time. Like, if you feel that things are drifting out of control you have to be able to rein it in. But a lot of it is also execution; a lot of what you are writing and creating might be super strange, but if the execution is right it will work."

"These are, I think," Matthies adds, internally processing a wealth of movie references he *could* make in this instance, "lessons that we learned from the original *Robocop*. That film is just totally bizarre in many ways, but it is executed so well that you are not for a moment doubting what's happening within that particular fiction. That's what we are always trying to do. And that's not to say that we are always successful, because any time you are doing something out of the norm you risk failure, but that's also what we like about working on Wolfenstein; that it *is* a really big creative challenge."

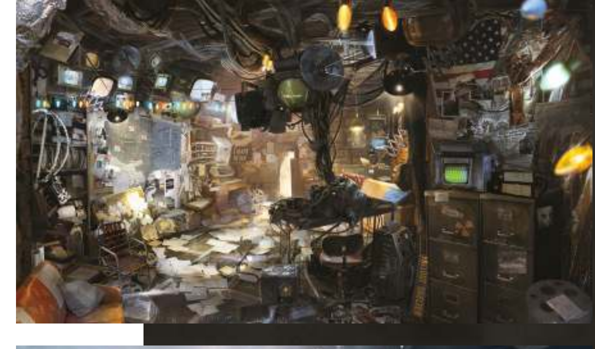
IN BRIEF
B.J. Blazkowicz won't let a little coma (yeah, another one) keep him down. America needs to be liberated from Nazi rule, and there's only one soldier fit for duty.

BUILDING A BETTER SHOOTER

It's rare to find a shooter that's so comfortable within its own skin. *The New Colossus* – much like its predecessor – wields nostalgia, not as a novelty but as another weapon in MachineGames' extensive arsenal. In 2014, the return of medkits, armour and ammo pickups weren't done merely in a service of the retro license, but made to be an intrinsic part of the game's design. Hunting these items out, committing their locations to memory and »



■ While *Wolfenstein* is a run and gun shooter at its core, it also requires a defter hand. Stealth is still integral to the experience, particularly when it comes to taking out commanders – their alarms can still be a killer.







RESULT OF WAR

→ B.J. Blazkowicz is down but not out

One interesting result of the ending of *The New Order* sees B.J. Blazkowicz running at a somewhat reduced capacity. He was so badly injured from his encounter with General Wilhelm "Deathshead" Strasse that he is struggling to function at all, creating a number of special gameplay situations. These can be fun; such as one such level in which you roll through a Nazi-controlled U-Boat blasting enemies away in a wheelchair, attempting to navigate an environment that was definitely not designed with accessibility in mind (those damn Nazis). Another more pressing factor on gameplay, however, sees Blazkowicz so broken that his health can't actually stay over 50 for any great length of time – in the section we saw, at least. That places an even bigger importance on stealth, on finding armour, and of keeping track of the placement of each and ever medkit. 50hp doesn't last too long in *Wolfenstein*, so it'll be interesting to see how MachineGames builds upon a sense of empowerment within its fiction that stays true to the character and world. Our guess? It'll involve machinery, exoskeleton suits and some wild Nazi technology stolen from a ridiculous location – it had better do.

factoring that into your ongoing survival against *Wolfenstein*'s brutal AI enemies and tiered level design defined the longevity and pacing of the game's best battles – regardless of whether they were cast across the stars in a lunar base, in the cramped confines of a U-Boat, or in the punishing arenas of London Nautica.

This sequel is more of the same in that respect. The rhythm to play remains unchanged; the velocity of brutality that you are expected to engage with has been tweaked and tightened, but *The New Colossus* doesn't make any great demands on you to learn new tricks or contend with a changing state of play. Scouting locations and learning enemy placements is still a necessity – asking you to move through locations stealthily, in plain sight, as you form a plan of attack – while victory is still achieved by expressing a penchant for extreme violence in the face of very real evil. MachineGames knows what works and what doesn't, and this is an opportunity to simply make the core Wolfenstein experience bigger and bolder than before.

"The teams behind these games are committed to honouring what made the originals great to begin with," Matthies tells us as we discuss the successful resurgence of Wolfenstein and Doom under the stewardship of Bethesda. "There's a tremendous amount of respect there. They are given the opportunity and resources to have the creative freedom to do something that really makes a statement – that isn't marketing driven or driven by some perceived current trend. It's people who are allowed to do their thing, and I think that's the most important aspect to it."

"THESE, I THINK, ARE LESSONS THAT WE LEARNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ROBOCOP"
JENS MATTHIES, CREATE DIRECTOR, MACHINEGAMES

CREATIVE FREEDOM

You can see that mentality running through the heart of *The New Colossus*, from the way it handles story, to the way in which it balances player power and difficulty in its combat. The only gimmick you are likely to find here is that it is bold enough to continue the story it laid the groundwork for in *The New Order*; it's a middle finger to the current industry trend of pouring resources, time and energy into making a game live and die as a service, and another to the idea of pushing in new bombastic features to appease the marketing machine. *The New Colossus* is dirty FPS game, where brutality and sincerity are made to co-exist in harmony.

We posit that this balance works so well is because, at least from the outside looking in, MachineGames seems to build its game in service to cohesion between story and gameplay, rather than sacrificing one for the other. Each can have its pitfalls, after all; gameplay dictating the direction of a story can lead to nonsense, a narrative designed to tour the protagonist from coast to coast in a hail of blood and bullets; story dictating the direction of gameplay can lead to overbearing monotony, shootouts in locations that simply aren't interesting to explore or engage with. Designing an experience in service to both, well, that's where *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* lives and breathes.

"We are trying very hard to build them at the same time. A key method of doing that is by not having one person in charge of everything, because one person will naturally gravitate to one side or the other," says Matthies, noting that MachineGames instead chooses to install experienced staff at the top of every facet of design, with decisions stalling until mutual decisions are made. "The way we are set it up is that we have people in charge of the gameplay and we have people in charge of the storytelling, and in order for us to make any progress we all have to agree on what we are doing."

"I think the reason we can do that is because we have all worked together for so long. Me and Jerk Gustafsson [producer and fellow MachineGames co-founder], for example, have been working together for 19 years making games now; we know each other extremely well, and we are able to communicate and reach agreements in ways that I think would be hard for people that are just starting out working together. But, basically, the goal is to always let the story highlight the gameplay and to make the gameplay highlight the story.









Set in 1961, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* sees B.J. Blazkowicz attempt to start a Second American Revolution against the Nazi regime following its occupation of America. Expect bloodshed, and a lot of it.

■ Dual-wielding is now far more open, allowing for even more death and destruction. You can freely mix weapons for dual wielding, letting you command any combination of shotguns, pistols, assault rifles and futuristic Nazi tech simultaneously.









■ *The New Order* is unique, not only in that it's a single-player only FPS game, but that its story has so much resonance and heart. It might be bodacious in its action, but it's surprisingly considered in its storytelling.

To really make everything fit together as seamlessly as possible."

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus is going to surprise come 27 October 2017, not because of its bombast, but because of its restraint. *The New Colossus* will be loud, but it will also have heart – a story we can connect with, that will stand the test of time. That is, after all, what MachineGames values above all else. "We want to do a timeless piece of storytelling and gameplay – for it to be something that we can look back on 25 years from now and be really proud of," says Matthies, acknowledging that while many of the in-game events may feel surprisingly close to home, this wasn't by design but simply a continuation of the story it set out to tell after the launch of 2014's *The New Order*. "We didn't approach development with [the current culture and political climate] in mind and, of course, when we started it these thing weren't really a topic… we built the content, primarily, for what the game needs."

The New Colossus will, inevitably, grab headlines because of its content – a sign of the fractured divide between culture and politics. But, be it by design or total happenstance, *Wolfenstein II* will only serve to highlight the importance of standing up against fascism no matter the frontline. "In a way, of course, [there] is social commentary inside the game, but it is not tied to any specific thing or event," Matthies considers, instead noting that the team has put a lot of emphasis into making the Nazis an enemy that you want to fight, that you want to take up arms against. That is, after all, the Wolfenstein way, isn't it? It shouldn't matter if we are making a return to castle Wolfenstein or taking the fight to central America.

CRASH BANDICOOT AND THE WEAPONISING OF NOSTALGIA

→ THERE'S A CLEAR INDUSTRY TREND EMERGING AND, QUITE FRANKLY, IT'S A LITTLE BAFFLING

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** | DEVELOPER: **VICARIOUS VISIONS** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1**

2017 is already being lauded as a breakout year for the current generation, putting it in direct contention to be considered one of the finest in the industry's history. You don't have to look far for supporting evidence with *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* reinventing and refining the tired open world formula; Resident Evil and Sonic back with a vengeance, in better shape than they've been for a decade. *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* have paved the way for smaller triple-A quality experiences, while *What Remains Of Edith Finch* and *Night In The Woods* have set a new benchmark for progressive, affecting storytelling; come on, we've even seen energy injected into the PC shooter scene with *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and *LawBreakers*. By any metric, 2017 has been one hell of a year.

And yet, considering all of the above, what game will you find *dominating* the UK charts? Which unassuming single-format remaster has toppled Sony's most successful release of the year with a meagre marketing push and little media attention behind it? Which icon from gaming's past has crawled out from his grave and spooked publishers enough that they've dusted off their vaults and begun serious re-evaluations of franchises that have long been considered dead and forgotten? Yes, it's Crash, Crash Bandicoot.

IN BRIEF

Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy has dominated the UK chart since its release. Even Wipeout and Micro Machines have made a comeback.

The *N. Sane Trilogy* launched 30 June for PS4 and has achieved – at the time of writing – seven weeks of UK chart domination, its popularity showing very little sign of waning. It has held that spot for longer than any other title this year, and has even become the biggest selling single-format release in the UK – edging out *Horizon Zero Dawn* and its reported 1.8 million launch sales. While the UK charts don't track digital sales, often obscuring the full story, Sony was kind enough to announce that *N. Sane Trilogy* was the top-selling PSN game in the US and Europe through July. The power of nostalgia is real, and the return of Crash is only the beginning.

In fact, this isn't the first instance of legacy acting as a potent marketing weapon in 2017. *WipEout Omega Collection* enjoyed similar success when it released in June, topping the UK charts – 2017 marks the year in which both of these retro franchises achieved chart topping milestones for the very first time. The wave of nostalgia has seen the SNES Mini pre-order allocations completely decimated, despite Nintendo promising a significant increase in stock compared with last year's NES Mini, while we've even seen the launch of *Micro Machines: World Series* – in spite of its resoundingly mediocre reviews – claim the second spot of the charts in its week of release. It's been 20 years since that





Above: *Micro Machines: World Series* and *WipEout Omega Collection* are just two of the latest releases to capitalise on the revival in interest in previously extinct franchises. How long will this trend continue?

Now these figures don't often tell the full story. UK chart data does, famously, only account for boxed releases – digital sales are a closely guarded secret in this industry, although that's a discussion for another day – but it's clear that Crash is making waves.

franchise held any relevancy in the industry, and now it's jostling with *Splatoon 2* and *GTAV* for chart space.

Activision CEO Eric Hirshberg recently reflected on the unexpected success of Crash and, as you might imagine, he is basically beside himself. "We knew that there was a passionate audience out there for Crash – full disclosure, myself among them – but we had no idea," he said in a call with investors. "It's hard to tell if that's a vocal minority or that's a real mass audience until you put something out there. Crash has surpassed all of our expectations by a pretty wide margin," he says, noting that Activision has been dipping its feet into this market in recent years, testing the waters with the likes of *Modern Warfare Remastered*. "This is a strategy that clearly has our attention, and while there are no new announcements today, I think you can be confident there will be more activity like this in the future with more great IP. The other opportunity beyond remasters is to look at some of our classic IP and ask whether or not it can be reborn on a new platform…"

> "CRASH HAS SURPASSED ALL OF OUR EXPECTATIONS BY A PRETTY WIDE MARGIN"
> **ERIC HIRSHBERG, ACTIVISION CEO**

Whether publishers use this new tool in their arsenal for good or for evil remains to be seen. Sony has, in particular, been pouring resources into HD remasters to mixed success this generation – but the popularity of certain releases this year shows that, should the right legacy be leveraged, then there is great success to be found, helping to build an even stronger base of faithful fans. However, the question remains, will publishers and developers treat these releases with the same care and attention that Vicarious Visions and Activision have with *N. Sane Trilogy* or are we in for a wave of forgettable HD makeovers for franchises we had rather left behind?

Should we see Bubsy and Croc popping up in the charts we'll know that this truly is the darkest of the timelines.

RETRO REVIVAL READER POLL...

→ We asked, "Which retro series do you want to see get the *N. Sane Trilogy* treatment?"

SPYRO 48%

An iconic figure of the late Nineties, and more recently the dragon used to kick off the Skylanders series, a package containing Insomniac's *Spyro: The Dragon*, *Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage!*, and *Spyro: The Year Of The Dragon* would be wonderful, especially if Activision treat it with the same care and attention it did Crash's revival.

EARTHWORM JIM 36%

History may not have been kind to Shiny Entertainment's *Earthworm Jim*, but a revival of the sarcastic earthworm could be exactly what we need in this age of ultra-serious releases. The original 1994 release was already given the remaster treatment in 2010, and we'd love to see Gameloft turn its attention to the sequel.



GEX 8%

Intended to be a mascot for Crystal Dynamics in the same vein as Mario and Sonic The Hedgehog, things didn't really pan out for the wisecracking gecko. Still, a compilation containing *Gex*, *Gex: Enter The Gecko*, and *Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko* could pay huge dividends, particularly for the core Sony fan base that exists around the series.

CROC 8%

Against all expectations, *Croc* was not only a success back in 1997 – enough so to spawn the 1999 sequel, the inventively named *Croc 2* – and it has spawned a rather vocal fan base over the years. The pairing of *Legend Of The Gobbos* and *Croc 2* would be something of a risk, but you never know...



> "THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE A SINGLE PIECE OF CODE OR ARTWORK THAT HASN'T BEEN TOUCHED IN SOME WAY"

IN BRIEF

No Man's Sky is a procedurally generated space exploration game in which you are left to investigate the mysteries of the universe.

■ Above: This first year has been an important first step for Hello Games. The release of *Atlas Rises* feels like closure on a turbulent year, and now it's time to let the studio grow and expand the release as it pleases. Right: Say what you will about *No Man's Sky*, but it's still one of the most visually impressive games on the market. The exotic biomes combined with photo mode provide some truly stunning results.



NO MAN'S SKY LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

→ JUST HOW MUCH HAS HELLO GAMES CHANGED ITS GAME IN A YEAR?

FORMAT: **PS4, PC** | PUBLISHER: **HELLO GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1-16**

"This update marks the one year anniversary of *No Man's Sky*, and a lot has changed," said Surrey-based developer Hello Games in a statement, emerging from its self-imposed exile for a rare instance of communication with the outside world. "This is the next step on our journey."

With *Atlas Rises*, Hello Games has demonstrated true resilience; it has doubled down on its commitment to the *No Man's Sky* concept and pushed back against a violent tide of relentless resistance – and that's us putting it nicely. With this third major content update – following the release of *Pathfinder* and *Foundation* earlier in the year – the studio has essentially overhauled the core focus and direction of *No Man's Sky*. Whereas before it could be seen as something of a free form, psychedelic exploration of the vast emptiness of procedural generation, it has now grasped at some semblance of structure.

The most significant new elements of the update include 30 hours of story content, the introduction of an overhauled quest system, the ability to edit and warp world terrain, a new alien race, a revamped galactic economy, the capacity to fast travel across galaxies, and the initial implementation of synchronous co-op. And that's us merely scratching the surface of what's to be found here now.

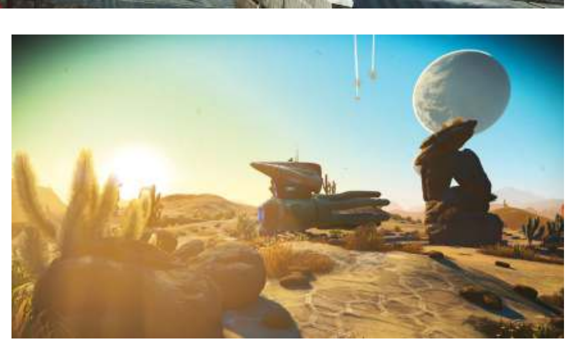
Hello Games has been making changes, fixes and tweaks based on community feedback over the last 12 months, and there doesn't seem to be a single piece of code or artwork that hasn't been touched in some way. Planet variety has been wildly improved, increasing the weirdness and exotic stylings of the biomes and the wildlife that inhabits them; ships can now be controlled in low orbit, crashed freighters can be salvaged for rare resources, and your ability to purchase those giant cargo ships is now more directly tied to progression, trading and resource acquisition.

Hello Games' desire for *No Man's Sky* to be a "very, very chill" game seems to have unravelled, falling by the wayside as the studio becomes wholly committed to placating the varying vocal communities that surround the game. But that change has given *No Man's Sky* some direction – it is no longer a relentless, bewildering race to the centre of the universe. It's now an adventure cast across 18 quintillion planets, with a narrative, quests and fresh gameplay hooks introduced to further expand the thrill of exploration.

The ability to claim a corner of the universe and make it your own, with the introduction of base-building as part of the *Foundation* update, was a clear signal that this was where Hello Games was taking the game. Crafting a homestead in *No Man's Sky* shifted emphasis away from relentless forward momentum and added a personable angle to the adventure – *Atlas Rises* only expands on that idea. The studio has introduced "double the lore and interactions of the existing game;" supporting it with small features, such as a communicator now found in your ship that lets you interact with your various companions even when you're on the move, and the activation of the huge black monoliths that can so frequently be found dominating the horizon of planets throughout *No Man's Sky*.

These portals let you travel, not only to other planets that you've already visited and to entirely random locations – should you so choose – but it will even let you travel to the bases of other players that you have encountered out in the worlds. That's right, multiplayer is here – was waiting really that difficult? Hello Games has introduced a rudimentary form of 16-player co-op, floating orbs representing other wayward travellers – explore with them and communicate via proximity chat should you so desire.

While it's limited in its current incarnation, it's a step towards something greater. *No Man's Sky* was never supposed to ship as a 'content complete' release, it was always destined to evolve over time. *Atlas Rises* is further proof that Hello Games is in sound control of *No Man's Sky* and its destiny. And if this is what the studio has been able to deliver in the space of a single year, we can only begin to imagine what the future might hold.





WHAT'S CHANGING IN THE EVIL WITHIN 2?

→ JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT COULDN'T GET ANY WEIRDER

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PS4, PC** | PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA** | DEVELOPER: **TANGO GAMEWORKS**
RELEASE: **13 OCT 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**

IN BRIEF
The Evil Within 2 sees a disgraced detective battling against manifested demons to save his daughter, absolve his partner and generally try to stay alive.



THE PLOT IS MADDER

1 If you want any chance of understanding what is going on here you are going to need to play *The Evil Within*, and the DLC, because this game has a bonkers story. It has you entering into a shared consciousness generated by the thoughts and memories of your potential dead, definitely missing, daughter who has disappeared inside of her own mind, which causes the falsified reality to twist and collapse around you. Look, just don't even.



THERE'S A NEW DIRECTOR

2 It's worth noting that *The Evil Within 2* will *not* see Resident Evil mastermind Shinji Mikami returning to the director's chair, instead John Johanas will be charged with overseeing the project while Mikami oversees as executive producer. Johanas was responsible for guiding the vision on the Juli Kidman-focussed DLCs, *The Assignment* and *The Consequence*. That means a few notable changes are coming.



SURVIVE OR DIE

3 With Johanas in place, *The Evil Within 2* seems to be shuffling away from the reliance its predecessor placed on jump scares and confined instances of action. Instead we should expect a stronger focus on survival horror, on a gradual build-up of tension with a horrible, terrifying release. Johanas demonstrated a strong capacity for this type of gameplay, and stealth, in particular, through the DLCs – something we are excited to see him expand on here.



NEW LOCATIONS, NEW TERRORS

4 Given that *The Evil Within 2* is set in a different STEM world entirely – that's the shared consciousness reality, for those of you that aren't keeping up – we've been told to expect a brand new series of villains and monstrosities to battle against. The basic locales of the game are going to be twisted small town America, think *Twin Peaks* but there's no coffee, and also it's definitely scarier. *Much* scarier.

BECOME A SLAVE TO FASHION IN ECHO

→ DRESS TO KILL, SNEAK OR RUN IN A HAUTE COUTURE NIGHTMARE

FORMAT: **PC, PS4** | PUBLISHER: **ULTRA ULTRA** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **19 SEP** | PLAYERS: **1**

How much sleep, hair and years off your life have you lost facing down the biggest challenges videogames have to offer? You've overcome seemingly impossible bosses and carved a way to the top of the multiplayer corpse pile, but how well would you do if you faced off against the toughest opponent of all – you.

That's the question *Echo* – a new sci-fi action-puzzle game from new Danish indie Ultra Ultra – is posing, and judging from its haute couture, neo-classical look, it's one we're definitely intrigued to answer. In fact, this third-person catwalk isn't just high fashion, it's high concept, too – placing you in the well-tailored boots of En, a woman who wakes up on a highly intelligent ship called the Palace. Turns out this clever vessel has been watching your every footstep and has unleashed its very own security measure – exact copies of you known as Echoes.

And it's here that this new indie shows it's got a brain to match that pretty face. These Echoes aren't just an exercise in vanity – the Palace has programmed them to mimic the behaviour it's been observing. If you're cautious and likely to skirt the edge of a room, so will your doppelgangers. If you're aggressive and over-confident, your clones will act in kind. However, should you deviate from your usual tactics, the Palace will shut down the loop and reboot them. During this blackout – where the palatial chambers of the ship are plunged into eerie darkness – you're free to move about and progress without fear of having your every move catalogued and emulated. When the loop restarts, though, your new Echoes will reanimate, having learned your latest in-game habits. With this in mind, there's a lot of freedom for you to shape how your enemies react in the next reboot – such as reusing an old tactic once it has been wiped from the current Echo incarnation.

It's a lot to get your head around and meta to the nth degree, but it's exactly the kind of Orwellian-esque concept to get you changing up your tactics rather than relying on the same old plan over and over again. Improvisation is the name of the game, and it's an ethos most of the developers at Ultra Ultra cut their teeth on while working on the Hitman franchise. And while the comparison to Agent 47's history of violence is hard to avoid – there's plenty of sneaking and quiet neck-snapping should you choose to go stealth – the former Io Interactive employees are keen to offer an experience that's their own.

When it comes to aesthetics, *Echo* certainly isn't trying to send in the clones, either. That neo-classical look – ranging from grand staircases and ornamental courtyards to intricately detailed balconies and sparkling chandeliers – showcases a gloriously lavish and opulent setting that's refreshingly original. With its stark white colour palette and Jean-Paul Gaultier-style black costumes, it's like exploring a science fiction take on the Palace of Versailles.

Of course, looks aren't everything, so we're hoping the final results aren't just skin deep. There's an intriguing story just waiting to be discovered beyond that unique mechanic, too. Turns out heroine En has been in stasis for over a century, and it doesn't take her long to learn the Palace is actually a creation from eons ago, one that's still waiting for its first human occupants to arrive. Sprinkle in some environmental puzzles to solve, cover-based sneakery and gunplay aplenty (including some obligatory slow-mo, naturally) and you have an intriguing and rather well-dressed indie title.

IN BRIEF
Attempt to escape a smart yet fashion-forward spaceship, while evading/taking down clones that adapt to your tactics.



While their behaviours will change every loop, the Echoes still retain one persistent trait – a base desire to kill you.





The Echoes might not have that mysterious red cube on their backs, but their behaviour will be unnervingly familiar.



HOW TO SET TRENDS IN ECHO

→ Attack of the clones

YEAR OF THE SNAKE

■ Channelling her inner Agent 47/Snake/Sam Fisher, En can also choose to go quiet and stealth her way through the vast and multi-tiered levels of the Palace. You can choke out your doppelgangers in true assassin style, but it'll make the next wave of Echoes far more cautious in their patrols.

BRING THE NOISE

■ If an Echo sees you, they'll run towards you and try to snap your neck. You'll have a few seconds to frantically tap the pad in order to shake yourself free. The sensory sphere around you will glow red to show noise, sending every nearby Echo rushing to your position with an aggressive edge.

■ The stark white design of Palace has a *Volume*/*MGS VR Missions* feel, which ties nicely into its optional stealth mechanics.

WAY OF THE GUN

■ Weapons are present and correct in the Palace, and we know En at least has access to a pistol. When a clone rushes you, you're given a QTE-style circle to align your reticule with in order to bring your attacker down. Just remember, your Echoes will be very trigger-happy come the next loop.

PARKOUR LIFE

■ Should you choose to sprint your way around the opulent interiors of the Palace, eventually your smart surroundings will pick up on your taste for speed and reprogram the Echoes to follow suit in the next loop. Your clones are now more likely to give chase, leaping over balconies and cover.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL EVO STREET FIGHTERS

→ BREAKING DOWN THE STATS TO FIND THE IDEAL WORLD WARRIOR

The Evo Championship Series is one of the most watched and most competitive esports events in the world. Running since 1996, it predates the modern idea of esports competition by some years, but has moved with the times and established itself as a true crucible for the best fighting game players around the world. 2017's event was no different as it broadcast every major victory and upset over nine different streams on Twitch between 14-16 July.

IN BRIEF

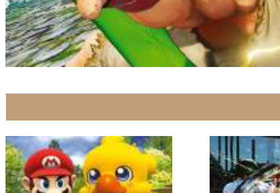
The Evo Championship Series is the premier esports event for fighting game fans giving us some of pro gaming's most dramatic moments.

Pretty much since its inception the true test of combatants at Evo has been *Street Fighter* in whatever its most recent guise might be. This year some 2,625 entrants took part in the competition. After three days of heated battle, 256 players managed to rank high enough to be awarded points in a final standings table compiled by Capcom. So, we thought we would crunch the numbers to find out which characters were the most successful according to their accumulated points from final standings divided by the number of ranked players who used them as their main. Here's what we found out.





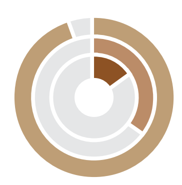




SUPER SMASH BROS. WII U

WINNER
Saleem "MVG Salem" Young

RUNNER-UP
Gonzalo " TSM ZeRo" Barrios



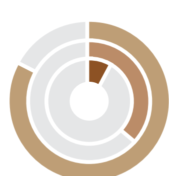




TEKKEN 7

WINNER
HyunJin "Echo Fox JDCR" Kim

RUNNER-UP
Choi "Echo Fox Saint" Jinwoo



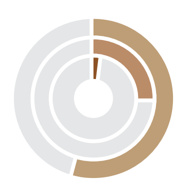




INJUSTICE 2

WINNER
Ryan "Dragon" Walker

RUNNER-UP
Tim "HoneyBee" Commandeur

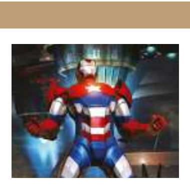




GUILTY GEAR XRD REV 2

WINNER
Omito Hashimoto

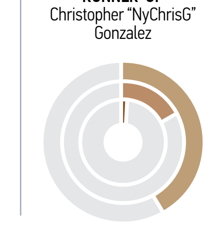
RUNNER-UP
T5M7

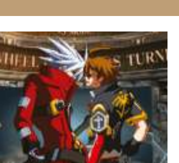


ULTIMATE MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3

WINNER
Rene "RyanLV" Romero

RUNNER-UP
Christopher "NyChrisG" Gonzalez



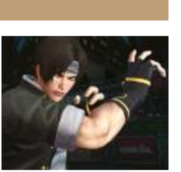


BLAZBLUE: CENTRAL FICTION

WINNER
Ryusei Ito

RUNNER-UP
Shoji "Fenritti" Sho

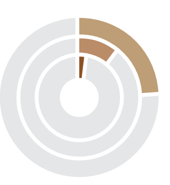




THE KING OF FIGHTERS XIV

WINNER
ChiaHung "E.T." Lin

RUNNER-UP
Zhuojun "Xiaohai" Zeng



→ NUMBER OF MATCHES PLAYED → NUMBER OF UPSETS (LOWER SEED WON) → NUMBER OF SHUTOUTS (ALL GAMES WON BY ONE PLAYER)

STREET FIGHTER V

→ WINNER
HAJIME "TOKIDO" TANIGUCHI AKUMA

→ RUNNER-UP
VICTOR "PG PUNK" WOODLEY KARIN

→ NUMBER OF MATCHES PLAYED:
5081

→ NUMBER OF UPSETS (LOWER SEED WON):
2414

→ NUMBER OF SHUTOUTS (ALL GAMES WON BY ONE PLAYER):
107

AKUMA • 233.33
AVG. POINTS EARNED

KARIN • 121.37

CAMMY • 101

NICALLI • 51.85

GUILE • 83.5

ZANGIEF • 90

RASHID • 55.75

CHUN-LI • 64.28

NASH • 90

DHALSIM • 74

→ TOTAL POINTS ACCUMULATED PER CHARACTER
1400 1300 1200 1100 1000 900 800 700 600 500 400 300 200 100

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
→ NUMBER OF PLAYERS CHOSEN BY

stats according to smash.gg

CAN ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS BREATHE LIFE INTO THE MYSTERIES OF ANCIENT EGYPT?

→ UBISOFT MONTREAL IS BUILDING ITS MOST INTRICATE OPEN WORLD YET, BUT WILL IT FIND A GRIP ON THE HISTORY THAT INSPIRED IT? ASSASSIN'S CREED'S BRAND HISTORIAN **MAXIME DURAND** GIVES US AN INSIGHT

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** | RELEASE: **27 OCTOBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**

History has always been Assassin's Creed's playground. It's been a powerful way for developer Ubisoft Montreal to leverage the past in an effort to build a better game world. The series has, somewhat successfully, always found a way to use history as a central game mechanic, as a way of grounding the somewhat ridiculous story within realistic environments and settings. But *Assassin's Creed Origins* presents something of a new challenge; Ancient Egypt is not only the furthest back in history the series has ever dared venture, but it's also a period in which history is often confused with the mythology that has helped fuel our ongoing fascination with it.

For *Origins*, as brand historian Maxime Durand tells **games™**, the studio has tried to strike a balance between delivering a realistic interpretation of Egypt and of fulfilling the fantasies that we have built around it – of exploring such a vibrant and rich point in the history of the world.

What challenges has Ubisoft Montreal faced when trying to bring ancient Egypt to life in *Assassin's Creed Origins*? Have you found that there is less to draw from in terms of accurate historical record?
From a researcher's perspective, Ancient Egypt is very rich in documentation but, simultaneously, it also has a lot of gaps to fill. Because the era is very popular, there is an incredible amount of mediums that are published about it every year. While this flow does produce a lot of good material, there is also an intense load that is not so good. One of the challenges was to make sure that the team got access to the most reliable information possible.

How did you approach this process of filtering out the good information from the bad?
So, we invested in a lot of scholarly books and magazines. We also hired more consultants for *Origins* than for any previous Assassin's Creed title – mostly Egyptologists, but also Classicists. This enabled us to be the most up to date on the information that we gather, and that inspires us to create our game universe and the activities that players will get to interact with.

Given *Origins* is introducing an all-new AI system, giving each of the thousands of characters that inhabit the world lives outside of the player's immediate gaze, was it important to get the smaller details right?
[Our research] hands us this useful information that allowed us to reproduce what daily life was like in the villages of Ptolemaic Egypt (the Kingdom of Egypt under the rule of the Ptolemaic dynasty), from the way that bread was cooked to the brewing of beer. On the other side, Egypt's climate has evolved a lot since the last 2,000 years, which is a little less than the time gap that separates us from Cleopatra and the game's era. The country was more lush and cities definitely did not span so largely, as it did for the last hundred and fifty years. Even with historical inspiration, the team's artists did have a lot of freedom to imagine a realistic setting.

Is it about creating a version of Ancient Egypt that is true to our imagination of it then, rather than necessarily trying to make it wholly accurate to the documentation that does exists?
The teams at Ubisoft have been working for over ten years now on the Assassin's Creed series. For a very long time we've been wanting to do the setting of Ancient Egypt. One of the joys for us is to recreate a selection of the most iconic and important landmarks and sites that have filled people's dreams for millenniums; the Pyramids and the Alexandria Lighthouse to name just two. Every region in the game is unique and represents a natural iconic part of that land. Our take has been to support a strong feeling of discovering and travelling. This is why, on the other hand of the historical accuracy spectrum, we have also created unique experiences based on the mysticism of the era – like giant snakes and such.

Some historical discrepancies also exist because of technical limitations. While recreating a whole country, we could simply not recreate everything and we had to make choices – we also benefit from not being a proper documentary. For instance, we know which fruits were available in Ancient Egypt. The mangoes would only have been introduced after our time period, for instance, but they had the advantage of bringing a lot of colours to tree fields. Concerning characters, we always are respectful of their whereabouts and of timeline, but we obviously have a tendency to portray them in a secret and fictional war.

It's commonly believed that the order of assassins – at least, as we understand them today – came into being as the Nizari Ismailis in the 11th century. Is there any historical grounding for an order of assassins to be active in 49BC, around the time that *Origins* is set?
However macabre this is, we are very lucky narratively speaking that assassinations and conspiracies have been ongoing for quite some time now in human history.

A simple glance at the dynastic struggles of the Ptolemaic Kingdom or the Roman Republic reveal their share of betrayals and assassinations. More prosaically, even if both orders (Assassins and Templars) did not exist in their known form at that moment, the ideals that they defend (free will, regulation, and so on) have been at the centre of mankind's history well before Cleopatra.

Then on the other side, Bayek himself is a Medjay, member of a real historic group that have patrolled towns and deserts for thousands of years in Egypt but who are also disappearing alongside the old ways of Ancient Egypt.





IN BRIEF

Developed by the *Black Flag* team, *Assassin's Creed Origins* will document the beginnings of Order of Assassins in Ancient Egypt.

"WE HIRED MORE CONSULTANTS FOR ORIGINS THAN FOR ANY PREVIOUS ASSASSIN'S CREED TITLE"

MAXIME DURAND, BRAND HISTORIAN

"LIKE ALL GREAT SCIENCE FICTION, DETROIT IS HEAVILY ROOTED IN REALITY – DEALING IN STARK REFLECTIONS"

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN



→ DIVE DEEPLY INTO ONE OF 2018'S MOST INTRIGUING PS4 EXCLUSIVES

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT** | DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

DEALING WITH COMPLEX THEMES

1 *Detroit: Become Human* is centred on Kara, Markus, and Connor, three androids who are struggling to come to terms with their sentience; and their place in a society that abhors the very notion of personal freedoms being afforded to creations of humanity. *Detroit* will attempt to navigate these complex themes.

IT HAS CLEAR INSPIRATION

2 While Isaac Asimov is a clear inspiration – if the three laws of robotics don't show up we'll be *shocked* – Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near* has been directly referenced; the 2005 non-fiction work posits that human intelligence will be quickly overtaken by that of machines, *Detroit: Become Human* will explore these ideas directly.

IT'LL CAUSE CONTROVERSY

3 Like all great science fiction, *Detroit* is heavily rooted in reality – dealing in stark reflections. The game echoes the civil rights struggles gripping the world, while the violence that has so frequently gripped the streets of Detroit over the years feels particularly on the nose. The game is destined to cause controversy.

BUT CAGE DOESN'T WANT IT TO

4 It seems David Cage is already aware of the parallels that are being drawn between his work and reality – he's been eager to downplay them. Quantic Dream is treading carefully, even going as far as to remove scenes from the game due to the lack of clarity in how they portrayed conflict and violence.

HOLLYWOOD TALENT ARRIVES

5 As Cage is known to do, a cast of film and television talent will lead *Detroit*. Valorie Curry [*Veronica Mars*] will reprise her role as Kara, first glimpsed in the 2012 PS3 "Kara" tech demo; Bryan Dechart [*Jane By Design*] will play Connor; and Jesse Williams [*Grey's Anatomy*] will take on the role of Marcus.

IN BRIEF

Heavy Rain director David Cage turns his attention to a neo-noir thriller heavily inspired by the works of author Isaac Asimov.



THE CAST IS HUGE

6 Quantic Dream has had to cast 300 roles for *Detroit*, each actor having to go through rigorous 3D scanning, with the resulting model turned into an in-game character. It then took the studio a further year and a half to finish up the performance capture and animation. The results, though, look worth it.

IT'S A GAME OF CHOICE

7 It took Cage almost three years to write the script – comprised of thousands of pages – and this will be reflected in the amount of choice and consequence available to the player. Every action will, seemingly, have a reaction, giving us more scope than ever to truly shape the story around our interpretations of the characters.

TAILOR YOUR REVOLUTION

8 With so much of the game centred on revolution, you'll be able to decide how you mark the world. You'll not only be tasked with freeing other oppressed machines, but leaving digital graffiti tags in an effort to make their voices heard. Though this could, of course, only draw unwanted attention from the powers that be.

BALANCING OUR EXPECTATIONS

9 What's difficult to figure out right now is just which version of Quantic Dream we are going to get. In *Detroit*, will we get the kind of detailed, gorgeous, groundbreaking release that the team delivered in *Heavy Rain*? Or will it be another overly ambitious, pretentious crawl like *Beyond: Two Souls*? Only time will tell.

ONE THING'S FOR CERTAIN

10 *Detroit* is going to be visually stunning. If you are still on the fence over 4K and the PS4 Pro, this will change your mind. A new proprietary game engine, supported by new renderers, physically-based shaders, new dynamic lighting engines and more will ensure that nothing else on the market looks like *Detroit*.

"FOR A COMPANY SO STRINGENTLY FOCUSED ON DELIVERING AUTHENTICITY IN ITS GAMES THIS IS QUITE THE DEPARTURE FOR WARGAMING"

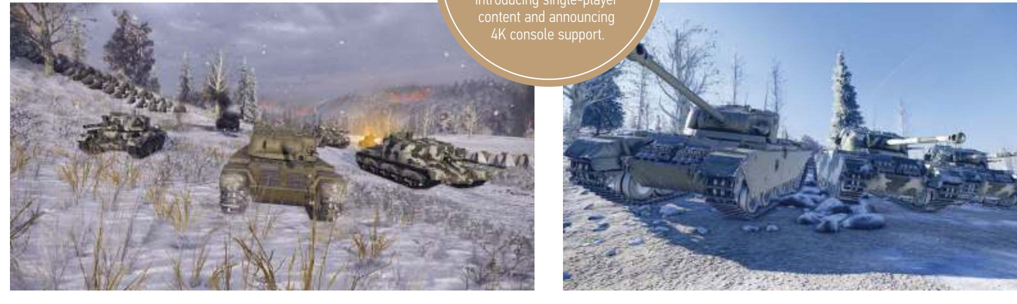
IN BRIEF

World Of Tanks receives its most significant update ever, introducing single-player content and announcing 4K console support.

WILL IT COME TO SWITCH?

World Of Tanks has found great success on the Xbox and PlayStation platforms and so inevitably we are led to ask just one question, where is the Nintendo Switch version? "Everybody is asking me this question and it's not like we don't have a lot of Switches in the office," Higa laughs, confirming that it's certainly something on Wargaming Chicago Baltimore's mind. But it isn't a matter of desire, but of install base. "Because *WoT* is free-to-play and because we don't have an 'in' on that ecosystem we have to see what the install base is. It has to reach a certain install base before we can include it [in our plans]… the way it works is that, because we aren't selling a retail product, we do need a large number of players to support the cost of implementing the platform."

"It's more just a question of… we have to have an economically viable product. That's why we have to watch the numbers real closely, and the executive team is always keeping track," adds Higa, noting that the team is just eager to get the game ported across as we ask whether the engine would function on the platform. "Our engineers would spend the time to make [the engine] work," he says, laughing again. "But that's the thing, we have to make sure that we have enough budget to make sure that they can spend the time to make it work."





WORLD OF TANKS GOES SINGLE-PLAYER



→ THE MISSING PIECE OF THE WARGAMING PUZZLE ARRIVES ON CONSOLE

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PS4, XBOX 360** | PUBLISHER: **WARGAMING** | DEVELOPER: **WARGAMING CHICAGO BALTIMORE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1-30**

It's easy to forget about *World Of Tanks*, particularly when it comes to console. The promotional cycle works in such a way that the industry is vehemently focused on the next new thing – on new technology, sequels and new IP. As a market, the language we use to discuss, and the perception we have of, free-to-play games is still in its infancy, and so a handful of games get forgotten by the mainstream and adopted by a wholly dedicated minority. *World Of Tanks* is one such game, quietly growing in popularity ever since its launch on Xbox 360 back in 2014 – swelling to support Xbox One and PlayStation 4 in the intervening years – but it's only now that Wargaming is really settling on the systems.

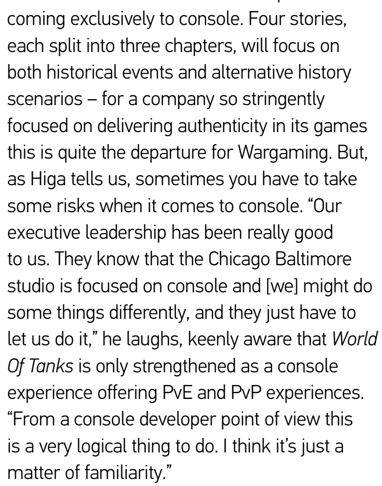
World Of Tanks is embracing narrative. Or, to be more accurate, single-player and co-operative story-driven scenarios that let players duck out of the chaos and stress of multiplayer and enjoy some good ol' fashioned tank-on-tank action. "As an add-on to the existing *World Of Tanks* console game, we really think this is going to be the ultimate tank experience," senior game designer and political scientist Darold Higa, PhD, tells **games™**. "*War Stories* is an expansion to the existing game. What we are introducing is single-player, co-operative PvE story driven campaigns. It's going to be pretty cool because what we are doing here is giving players the opportunity to experience *World Of Tanks* without, necessarily, some of the pressure of online play. And we are finally adding a narrative."

War Stories is the new free expansion coming exclusively to console. Four stories, each split into three chapters, will focus on both historical events and alternative history scenarios – for a company so stringently focused on delivering authenticity in its games this is quite the departure for Wargaming. But, as Higa tells us, sometimes you have to take some risks when it comes to console. "Our executive leadership has been really good to us. They know that the Chicago Baltimore studio is focused on console and [we] might do some things differently, and they just have to let us do it," he laughs, keenly aware that *World Of Tanks* is only strengthened as a console experience offering PvE and PvP experiences. "From a console developer point of view this is a very logical thing to do. I think it's just a matter of familiarity."

The first story is based around the Battle Of Romania – *Brothers In Armour*, available now – but the following stories will look to alternative history to inform their narratives and direction. The second, *Flashpoint Berlin*, is a 'what if?' based on the Berlin Blockade. Further stories that have been teased include an inversion of the Battle Of Britain with German tanks landing in London, and another focused on the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

So, why has it taken so long to do something so logical? *World Of Tanks* has always been a multiplayer first experience. 15 versus 15, battling it out on historical battleground and trash talking from shrubbery. To make this work, Higa and his team didn't just have to write scripts, they had to design an entirely new set of systems. "Even if you look at most shooters on console, there's definitely a single-player aspect and then a multiplayer aspect. We were trying to decide how we could approach this in the right way for a long time… but because we are so multiplayer focused we had to go out and build an AI system that we were satisfied with. That was a missing component and that wasn't something that was a part of our original development plan, so we had to kind of develop it on the side – a parallel process to what we were doing [normally]," he says, adding, "so, it's not like *War Stories* was never ever a part of the picture, we just didn't have the pieces to really make it viable."

The thing is, it works. *World Of Tanks* on console with *War Stories*, not to mention the 4K assets coming to Xbox One X and PS4 Pro this November, really pushes the product to a new level. It feels like a complete experience, one that can appeal to different types of players – a game that, in spite of its lack of mainstream media traction, deserves your attention as much as any other game on the platform.





Above: *War Stories* is a single-player focused expansion for *World Of Tanks*, coming exclusively to console players. The first set of chapters is available right now on all Xbox platforms and PS4. More stories are planned for later in the year.
Left: Famed composer Inon Zur, responsible for the soundtracks in *Crysis*, *Dragon Age II*, and *Fallout 4*, has created the OST for *War Stories* and its accompanying comic book panel interludes.





IN BRIEF
Team up with your friends to construct bases and shoot monsters in this charming triple-A quality, free-to-play action game.

KILLER CONCEPT

Fortnite works so well because it understands its strengths and plays to them dutifully. It knows exactly what it is and what it has drawn from, leveraging its familiarity to create something with the potential to be truly special. It takes the easy and intuitive building found in games such as *Minecraft* and *Starbound* and marries that general concept with the Gears Of War Horde mode design, pitting you and several other players against incoming, and increasingly challenging, waves of enemies – each as eager as the next to tear down your beloved designs.



FORTNITE FINDS ITS FEET IN EARLY ACCESS



→ HANDS-ON AND DESPERATE FOR MORE

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **EPIC GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1-4**

We were honestly beginning to wonder whether *Fortnite* would ever make it out of development. After so many years on the periphery, *Fortnite* was looking more and more like a concept that just simply wouldn't work in the wilds. But here we stand corrected, marvelling at the graceful execution of Epic's "action-building" hybrid design, enjoying its quirks and sinking every spare moment into its missions and complexities.

Fortnite has entered premium early access, a way for the development team to refine its free form tower defence game ahead of its launch into the free-to-play arena in early 2018. That is to say then, that it's still a little rough around the edges; the menu and progression systems, in particular, need to be overhauled, because right now they only take away from the core fun that *Fortnite* has to offer. But the longer we spend in the game's company – completing missions with other players and shooting hordes of monsters away from our hastily constructed fortresses – it's *Fortnite*'s intuitive and engaging approach to moment-to-moment play that continues to impress, inviting us back for another round or two of play. *Fortnite* is designed to appeal through familiarity and excite through its surprisingly fresh execution, and right now it's clear the Epic is on to something truly special.



ENGAGING LOOP

■ Every mission in *Fortnite* has the same basic gameplay loop and it's immensely enjoyable. You begin by exploring your surroundings; using a pickaxe to tear down trees, cars, rocks, and other objects in the game for resources. You save survivors and complete busy work as you labour to secure the objective site; preparing for the incoming storm of enemies by building an impressive fortress around a point of interest in tandem with other players, each complete with multiple floors, traps and vantage points to assist in the shootouts that follow.

INTUITIVE BUILDING

■ The building system Epic has designed here is rather elegant. It's flexible and fun to wield, held back only by some perplexing menu design. But once you get your head around that, it's super easy and surprisingly rewarding to begin base creation. Constructions go up quickly with four players working on it – even without the luxury of communication (seriously, it's 2017, buy a microphone) – with each intuitively layering new elements upon one another; crafting windows, doors and traps without hesitation in anticipation of the incoming battle.

SIMPLE FUN

■ Epic has designed a world that you'll want to spend time in. The characters, the visuals and the sound design in *Fortnite* are all a real delight, doing just enough to stave off any immediate concerns you might have about the somewhat limited array of mission types and variants. Gunplay too is simple to wield, but surprisingly charming in its execution. Switching between weapons and building/repairing defensive structures is done with the press of a button, while crafting new weapons and ammo in the middle of combat only helps to upend the grind of mowing down waves of enemies, making *Fortnite* feel frictionless in its design.







British indie folk band Daughter has written and recorded the soundtrack to Before The Storm, although we recommend checking out their 2013 debut, If You Leave, should you want more.

CREATING THE SOUNDTRACK TO LIFE IS STRANGE

→ HOW DAUGHTER LEVERAGES LIFE, LOSS AND GRIEF TO CRAFT THE EMOTIONAL ANCHORS TO BEFORE THE STORM

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX** | DEVELOPER: **DECK NINE** | PLAYERS: **1** | RELEASE: EPISODE ONE: **31 August, Episode Two: October 2017, Episode Three: December 2017**

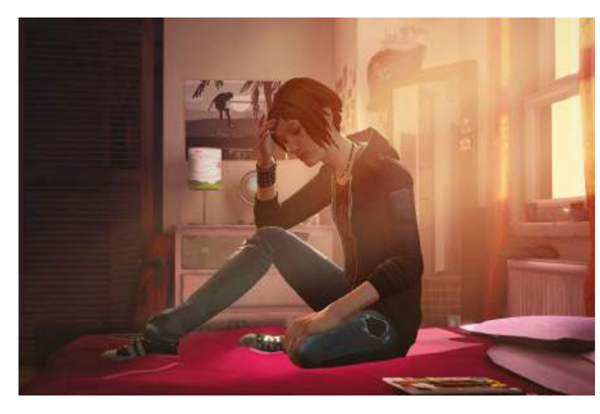
There were many reasons to love Max Caulfield and Chloe Price's original adventures in Arcadia Bay, but we were always drawn to the sounds behind the serendipitous chaos that threatened to swallow the coastal town. *Life Is Strange* featured a carefully curated soundtrack – compositions from artist Syd Matters and an array of licensed tracks – that underpinned the entire experience, heightening its moments of intense loneliness and reflecting on its powerful themes of life, loss and grief. For *Before The Storm*, the three-episode prequel, the soundtrack has been handled by indie folk band Daughter, and the result is certainly something special – attuned to the heart of the characters and experience.

"One of the main draws to the game was Chloe as a character," says Elena Tonra, lead singer of Daughter. "A lot of the lyrics in our music [are] super personal, and I haven't ever really written anything that is about another person. I was trying to sync into… especially into Chloe's character, sync into what she's feeling and try and relate her life, and her feeling of grief and loss, to my own life."

Before The Storm puts us in the shoes of sixteen-year-old Chloe who, like so many teens, feels trapped within the borders of her hometown – left to feel as if the world is moving around her as she is stuck standing still. Here we'll get the opportunity to experience the relationship between Chloe and Rachel so heavily alluded to in *Life Is Strange*, and it was this idea of friendship, and the emotions that fuel it, that the members of Daughter wanted to get to the core of as it began to create this hauntingly beautiful soundtrack. "One thing that I was quite conscious of, as we were making the music, is I wanted parts to be doubled or harmonised in some way," says guitarist Igor Haefeli, explaining how imperative it was to build a soundscape – themes and melodies – that are accompanied by or reflected upon by another instrument in the arrangement. "They [would] kind of sit in a different space but they always sit there together. And that was an idea of sonically representing what their friendship could feel like."

IN BRIEF
Life Is Strange gives Chloe the ability to 'Backtalk' – a conversational gambit that can either help her or hinder her in her progress.

The band had to work from early scripts, so getting to the core of these feelings and relationships was a big part of the creative process. "For us, her father dying and her trying to deal with it, it was the saddest point of the story [and] the point of the story that really spoke to us," Tonra says, adding, "it was always at the back of our heads, this core of trying to get over something or just trying to process that. Musically, the undercurrent to everything we have to do is to have grief somewhere in it."



Above: The Deluxe Edition of *Before The Storm* is set to include a bonus chapter, entitled Farewell, which will let you play as Max Caulfield for one last time in a special condensed episode.

Grief underpins *Life Is Strange*. It is the aura that ties it all together – that makes it so relevant and resonating. *Before The Storm* may be a different kind of tale, but with a band like Daughter behind it, we know it'll have a simple captivating quality to it. "We are so proud to have written the soundtrack for *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*", adds Tonra. "It was our first experience working on an original soundtrack, and are so honoured to have been given the opportunity to work with the team."



WHY I ♥...

OVERWATCH

ALEX PRESTON, CREATOR, ARTIST, DESIGNER, HEART MACHINE

Can it be a love/hate relationship? I love **Overwatch** *right now. I still play that goddamn game like almost every day, definitely every week. It's kind of infuriating at times because I want to be better at it and I want to find people and teammates all this stuff, but even when I go through the worst times with it, where I get into a competitive match that's terrible and everybody is toxic and we lose and there go all my points and I just wasted my day because I played for three hours and I'm down ten points from where I started, I still want to come back to that game.*

I love what Blizzard was able to do with the characters in it, the amount of character it adds into every little animation and detail, the environments, the music. Every aspect of that game is so polished and has so much care and attention put into it that you don't see that as much anymore. But with Blizzard it has the luxury of Blizzard time and resources and sometimes that's super frustrating, but other times like this with **Overwatch** *you see the end result and it was worth it doing this because we see the amount of love it has put into this and it loves that genre of arena shooters and it loves the characters, as cheesy and stupid as some of them are. I've come around to embracing them. Even Reaper, Mr Edgelord, yeah I kind of like that guy now. It's strange and I don't usually find that much affinity with a game like this, but it trapped me into it. And I can't get out of it, but a lot of it has to do with that love and care and detail it has put into every aspect of that game and that's really hard to match. Goddamn* **Overwatch***!*



"Every aspect of that game is so polished and has so much care and attention put into it that you don't see that as much anymore"

ALEX PRESTON, CREATOR, ARTIST, DESIGNER, HEART MACHINE

XBOX ONE X

THE NEW KING OF CONSOLES

AS THE LAUNCH OF THE **XBOX ONE X** APPROACHES FAST WE GOT OUR HANDS ON THE SYSTEM TO FIND OUT HOW IT PERFORMS AND LOOKED AT MICROSOFT'S CHANCES OF CLOSING THE PS4'S SALES LEAD IN THE COMING YEARS WITH HELP FROM INDUSTRY INSIDERS

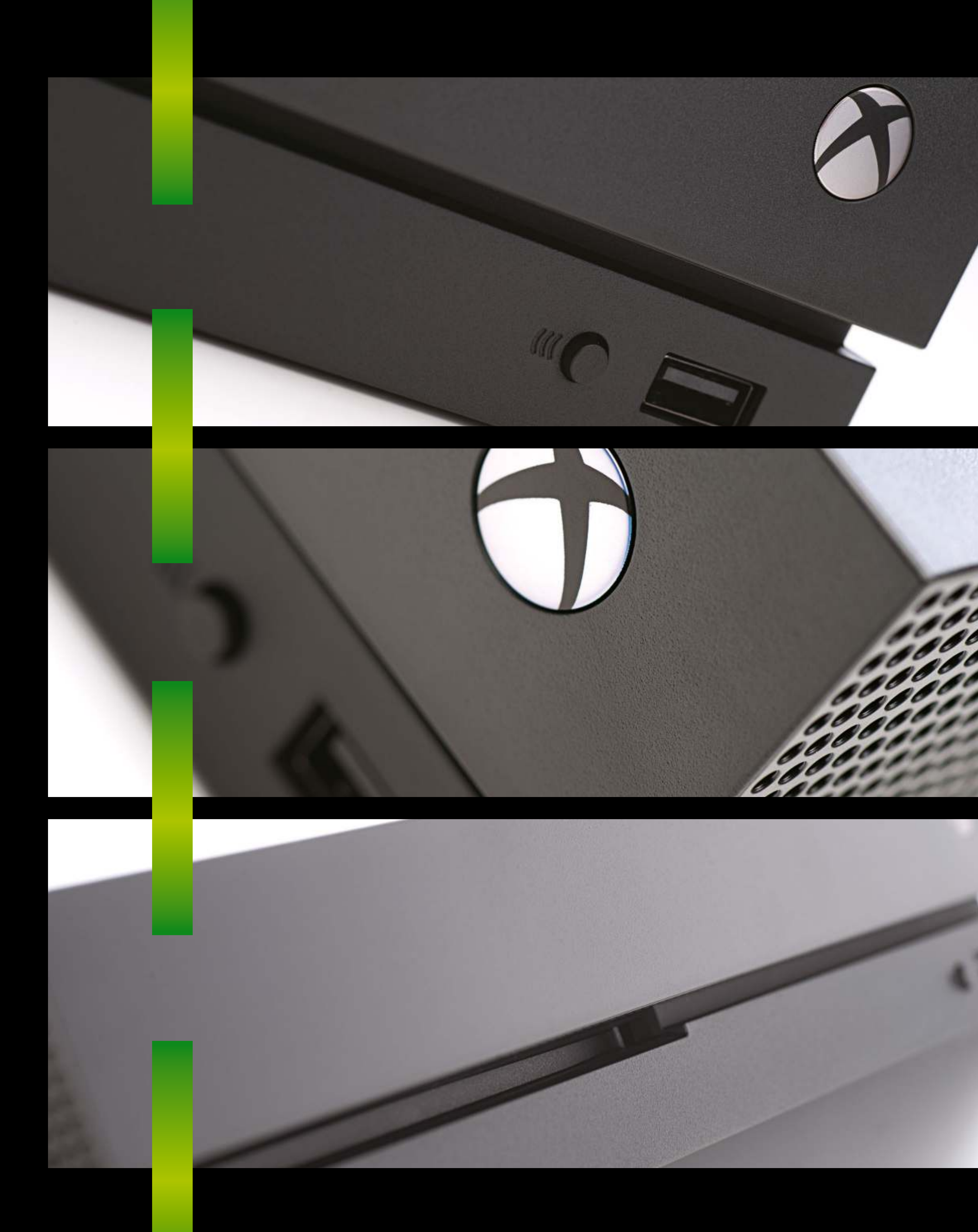
One of the problems with the concept of a console war is that wars have winners and losers or they end in a truce. Console competition doesn't really work like that. For the most part everyone does well out of a console war, it's just that one manufacturer tends to do a lot better than the others. If anything it's more like a long-distance race with no discernible end. Everyone just keeps running until they can't run anymore. So far, in what we term the eighth generation of console gaming, the PS4 is the clear leader, but could Microsoft's Xbox One X – the most powerful home console ever produced – tip the balance?

On the surface it looks like a steep challenge. VGChartz currently estimates PS4 sales at 59.51 million worldwide while the Xbox One sits at 29.98. Attempting to match those figures, even with the most powerful console on the market, is likely to be a tough call. The PS4 has already reached about 75 percent of the total sales of the PS3 in just four years, which is incredibly impressive, and while some of that momentum has slowed and the Xbox One S has seen some good uptake, Sony's console is a bit of a juggernaut. So could Microsoft catch up now with the launch of the Xbox One X?

"Nope," is the succinct and cutting assessment of Lewis Ward, IDC research director, for Gaming and VR/AR. Thankfully he expanded on that response. "It should give PS4 Pro a run for its money in 2018 in the US and UK, however. I'm projecting about four million Xbox One Xs shipped from Q4 2017 through the end of 2018, and about five million PS4 Pros shipped in the same timeframe. The way shipments break down globally, however, that implies a very tight race in the US and the UK."

But what about it being the most powerful console on the market? That was how Sony helped establish its lead with the PS4 in the first place, making the quite reasonable claim that all of the third-party, multiformat games we wanted to play would look better and play better on its system. Could Microsoft not make the same claim now with the immensely powerful Xbox One X?

"Microsoft can, and certainly will, try to make that case, but it's too late in the eigth gen console race for Microsoft to catch up from a hardware sales angle," says Ward. "The problem for Microsoft at this late date is that the PS4's installed base is so much bigger that it's almost impossible to convince major third-party game studios to invest significant resources into exclusive content that's going to take advantage of the additional hardware capacity of the Xbox One X. You'll see more games and other entertainment content running at full 4K resolution at 30-60 frames per second than on PS4 moving forward, and perhaps see some additional in-game effects, but the basic game and overall experience is going to otherwise be quite similar across a PS4 Pro and an Xbox One X." »



SHOULD YOU BUY AN XBOX ONE X?

A HELPFUL GUIDE TO PICKING YOUR NEXT GAMING DEVICE

START DO YOU OWN AN **XBOX ONE**?

YES / NO

- DO YOU OWN AN XBOX ONE? — YES: IS IT AN **XBOX ONE S**? — NO: DO YOU OWN A **PS4**?
- IS IT AN **XBOX ONE S**? — YES: DO YOU WANT BETTER PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR GAMES? — NO: DO YOU OWN A 4K TV?
- DO YOU WANT BETTER PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR GAMES? — YES: DOES PLAYING GAMES IN NATIVE 4K MATTER TO YOU? — NO: STICK WITH YOUR **XBOX ONE** FOR NOW
- DO YOU OWN A 4K TV? — YES: DOES PLAYING GAMES IN NATIVE 4K MATTER TO YOU? — NO: ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT GETTING ONE?
- ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT GETTING ONE? — YES: DOES PLAYING GAMES IN NATIVE 4K MATTER TO YOU? — NO: STICK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE
- DOES PLAYING GAMES IN NATIVE 4K MATTER TO YOU? — YES: CAN YOU AFFORD A £450 CONSOLE? — NO: ARE YOU HAPPY WITH JUST AN HDR EXPERIENCE?
- ARE YOU HAPPY WITH JUST AN HDR EXPERIENCE? — YES: **XBOX ONE S** IS FOR YOU — NO: WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO SWITCH FORMATS?
- WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO SWITCH FORMATS? — YES: BUY A **PS4 PRO** — NO: STICK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE
- CAN YOU AFFORD A £450 CONSOLE? — YES: GET YOUR **XBOX ONE X** PREORDER IN NOW! — NO: CAN YOU SAVE UP?
- CAN YOU SAVE UP? — YES: WAIT FOR A **XBOX ONE X** PRICE DROP NEXT YEAR — NO: CONSIDER A CHEAPER **PS4 PRO** FOR £340
- DO YOU OWN A **PS4**? — YES: IS IT A **PRO**? — NO: ARE YOU A PC GAMER?
- ARE YOU A PC GAMER? — YES: DO YOU OWN OR CAN YOU AFFORD A 4K-READY GRAPHICS CARD/RIG? — NO: A SWITCH THEN?
- A SWITCH THEN? — YES: DO YOU WANT TO PLAY GAMES IN 4K? — NO: DO YOU EVEN PLAY GAMES?
- DO YOU OWN OR CAN YOU AFFORD A 4K-READY GRAPHICS CARD/RIG? — YES: YOU'LL GET TO ENJOY XBOX EXCLUSIVES ANYWAY, SO STAY WHERE YOU ARE — NO: DO YOU WANT TO PLAY GAMES IN 4K?
- DO YOU WANT TO PLAY GAMES IN 4K? — YES: DO YOU WANT THE MOST POWERFUL DEVICE POSSIBLE, SHORT OF A PC? — NO: STICK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE
- DO YOU WANT THE MOST POWERFUL DEVICE POSSIBLE, SHORT OF A PC? — YES: GET AN **XBOX ONE X** — NO: LOOK INTO A **PS4 PRO**
- IS IT A **PRO**? — YES: DO YOU HAVE OR PLAN TO HAVE PSVR? — NO: ARE YOU CONSIDERING A 4K TV?
- ARE YOU CONSIDERING A 4K TV? — YES: DO YOU PLAY MORE THIRD PARTY GAMES THAN FIRST PARTY? — NO: WANT TO INVEST IN VR?
- WANT TO INVEST IN VR? — YES: CONSIDER AN UPGRADE TO **PS4 PRO** FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE — NO: STICK WITH YOUR **PS4**
- DO YOU HAVE OR PLAN TO HAVE PSVR? — YES: STICK WITH THE **PS4 PRO** — NO: DO YOU PLAY MORE THIRD PARTY GAMES THAN FIRST PARTY?
- DO YOU PLAY MORE THIRD PARTY GAMES THAN FIRST PARTY? — YES: DOES HAVING THE MOST POWERFUL CONSOLE ON THE MARKET MATTER TO YOU? — NO: **PS4 PRO** IS THE WAY FOR YOU
- DOES HAVING THE MOST POWERFUL CONSOLE ON THE MARKET MATTER TO YOU? — YES: YOU SHOULD CONSIDER SWITCHING TO **XBOX ONE X** — NO: **PS4 PRO** IS THE WAY FOR YOU

"THIS IS ALL A PART OF XBOX OPENING ITSELF UP AS A PLATFORM, BEING APPROACHABLE FROM MANY ANGLES, OFFERING GAMES AT MULTIPLE POINTS OF ENTRY AND FOR EVERY KIND OF PLAYER POSSIBLE"



The delay of *Crackdown 3* is a blow for the launch of the Xbox One X, but perhaps best all around. It would have been more damaging to launch an unfinished game on a new system.

A NEW AGE OF GAMING

But is it Microsoft's intention to close the gap with the PS4 with the Xbox One X? We don't think so. Everything we've heard from Microsoft suggests that it's expecting to sell more Xbox One S consoles than this new machine, but the Xbox One X may be more important to Microsoft as a symbol of its changing approach to the industry. We talked about the end to the traditional console cycle with the launch of the PS4 Pro, but the evolution of the industry is far more varied than just when and how more powerful consoles come along. We engage with games in a different way now than we did ten years ago. The idea of service games – experiences that grow and evolve over time – is new, and Microsoft is at the forefront with the Xbox One X being a new piece in the puzzle for a different kind of Xbox platform.

While we track all of the big releases across multiple formats, the reality is that the vast majority of gamers not only stick to a single system – maybe augmented by a handheld or mixing some light PC and console play – but also only pick up a handful of big titles each year. And those titles are increasingly being chosen based on the value for money they can offer. There's a reason why games like *FIFA* and *Call Of Duty* are perennially at the top of the charts each year; they offer endless gaming experiences thanks to their respective online modes.

What's more we stick with our older games for longer than we used to do. There's a reason why the best-selling game on all platforms in 2017 has been *Grand Theft Auto V* and it's not a lack of good titles coming out this year – because barring a couple of let-downs, it's been a fantastic one so far. *GTA V* has been a kind of standard-bearer for the new model of keeping a popular game alive, and at the forefront of people's minds, without asking gamers to buy a new version every year. It was equally as telling that when *Black Ops 2* was added to Xbox One backwards compatibility, it shot to the top of Xbox Live's most-played games, again pointing to the longer tail we prefer from our games these days.

Xbox is embracing this new approach in a number of ways and all of them at the cutting edge of how to deliver games to us, the players. The headline grabber remains cross play with PC, which means that first-party and a number of other title purchased through the Xbox marketplace are playable on Xbox One and PC. While we see a lot of people approach this rather cynically with sentiments such as 'Why would I buy an Xbox One when I can play all its games on a PC', we would point out that this is really more in keeping with Microsoft's broader corporate interests. It is, after all, as much of a PC-focused business as it is a console one and Xbox being more platform-agnostic is not only complementary to that, it also makes the platform more open to new players. We see this also in Microsoft supporting cross play between Xbox One and PC on a number of titles and, even further, supporting *Minecraft* on multiple systems and enabling players from all of them to join each other. It's currently only Sony that is standing in the way of allowing PS4 players to enjoy that option too.

So this is all a part of Xbox opening itself up as a platform, being approachable from many angles, offering games at multiple points of entry and for every kind of player possible. You can see that again through its support of EA Access and the launch of its own subscription gaming service, Game Pass, both of which have been very successful according to Ward. "Preliminary analysis »



THE CRACKDOWN 3 CONUNDRUM

DID LOSING THIS LAUNCH TITLE COST THE XBOX ONE X MASSIVELY?

Microsoft announced the delay of *Crackdown 3* in August, just ahead of its Gamescom showing and after what was considered a lacklustre demo at E3 in June. Our primary concern with the game was that given that its cloud-processing online destruction was previously its headline-grabbing feature, it didn't show off either that or any live gameplay during its conference. It seemed to us like the perfect time to do a stage co-op session with four agents showing off everything the power of the cloud and Xbox One X combined could achieve. That this wasn't the case struck us as strange and even stranger was the single-player demo available on the show floor, that also didn't appear to be showing *Crackdown 3*'s best side.

So a delay into 2018, as damaging as it is on the face of things for the launch of the Xbox One X, removing its one-and-only day and date exclusive, seems like the right move. We're used to seeing games like this far further along at this point in their development and we're used to seeing Microsoft shout a lot more about games like this with three months left to release. The extra months in development will hopefully help *Crackdown* get to a place where it's the anarchic sandbox actioner that it deserves to be and that can really exemplify the best of what the Xbox One X can achieve. The costs of launching a bad game alongside the Xbox One X would be far greater than the cost of losing that launch day exclusive.

THE SPECS EXPLAINED

WHAT'S INSIDE THE XBOX ONE X AND WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

■ **Main processor** – The Scorpio engine: This is the heart of the Xbox One X and has been custom-built with AMD to power this 4K gaming powerhouse. Because this is an upgrade on the Xbox One rather than a new machine entirely, it was built around the common needs of games right now to be scaled up to 4K, which should make it a very easy system to develop for and make upgraded titles all the smoother.

BD/DVD drive – 4K Blu-ray: This is the same as the Xbox One S allowing for full 4K Blu-ray playback, which is a nice addition.

■ **GPU** – 40 custom compute units at 1172MHz: The PS4 Pro was looking good in this regard with its 36 compute units at 911MHz. The additional speed is thought to come from some efficiency gains for the GPU.

■ **Memory** – 12GB GDDR5: The old Xbox One was running on DDR3 rather than GDDR5, which brings the One X in line with the PS4 Pro in terms of up-to-date tech. However the 12GB of RAM is four more than Sony's console so it should be able to handle a lot more data at once.

Storage size – 1TB: More or less the standard these days for a new console, however a growing emphasis on downloadable titles and the growth of Game Pass may see 1TB looking pretty limited in another year's time.

of our Q3 2017 US gamer survey shows that about 20 per cent of Xbox One owners use one or both of these subscription services," he reveals. "That's a good attach rate in my book given that these services are still fairly young and aren't cheap."

But while these mechanisms for accessing games might be said to be cutting edge and forward-looking, they are inherently giving gamers access to older games – for the most part, EA Access obviously offers some early access to its big games, but it's not the primary purpose of the subscription. And in some ways that's why the Xbox One X is so important to the broader strategy, because while Game Pass gives us a new way to access the games we love to play and the Xbox One S gives us a little better performance and HDR gaming, the Xbox One X is the forward-facing, raw power side of the business writ large.

WHAT ABOUT THE GAMES?

The delay of *Crackdown 3* from its day and date launch with the Xbox One X to Spring 2018 has lead to a lot of negative talk around the Xbox One X's launch line-up, since on the surface, it has no launch exclusives to boast. But then again, neither did the PS4 Pro. These aren't traditional console launches for all their improvements, because one of their biggest draws is that they will play the games you already own better and – if you're new to the system – arrive with a huge and affordable gaming library that has been updated to take advantage of the full power they offer.

"I'm not hyperventilating like some observers are doing," says Ward of the console's lack of first-party support for launch. "It's true that with *Crackdown 3* being pushed back that the holiday 2017 exclusive triple-A games line-up is pretty thin on Xbox One. However, the third-party games line-up is quite solid, and counting the impact of some smaller digital exclusives, the importance of add-on packs and free-to-play titles, more backwards-compatible titles, not to mention the perennial goldmine that is *Minecraft*, I'm less concerned about holiday 2017 Xbox One hardware and software sales than some industry prognosticators."

"WE SHOULDN'T UNDERESTIMATE THE COUP OF ATTRACTING PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS TO THE XBOX ONE"

By the time the Xbox One X launches games like *Fallout 4*, *Final Fantasy XV*, *Halo 5: Guardians*, *Resident Evil 7* and *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* will have been updated for 4K play and, in some cases, will offer vastly improved frame rates. What's more new titles like *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Forza Motorsport 7*, *FIFA 18*, *Shadow Of War* and *Star Wars: Battlefront II* will all be 4K-ready for Xbox One X. That seems like a pretty strong selection of 4K-ready games to us even if it isn't exclusive to the console, but Microsoft will likely be in a strong position to claim its versions of each of these games look best on Xbox One X.

When it comes to upcoming releases things are a little more mixed. Whereas the PS4 Pro had the impressive *Horizon Zero Dawn* in its near future, Xbox One X will be leaning on *Crackdown 3* and *Sea Of Thieves*. Both are interesting games – one from a

■ Having third-party titles like *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Shadow Of War* running in 4K at launch is going to be a massive boon for the Xbox One X. It needs to show off just how much better it is at running our most-played games than the competition.

■ *ReCore* is getting a definitive edition remaster for the launch of the Xbox One X. It was a reasonably good game before and the upscaled graphics will likely help things a little, but it's still not the killer app many were hoping for.

■ **CPU** – Eight custom x86 cores: These cores have been clocked to 2.3GHz, which is a little better than the already impressive performance of the PS4 Pro at 2.1GHz. As an example, the Intel Celeron 2.3GHz processor is about 5 per cent faster than its 2.1GHz variant.

External dimensions – 300x60x240mm: while this is the smallest console Microsoft has ever produced, having it sit side-by-side with an Xbox One S you would hardly be able to tell. It's a very slight difference. It's when you pick it up that you realise how much more is going on inside the box thanks to its 8.4lbs of weight.

Ports – 3x USB 3.0, 2.0b HDMI out, 1.4b HDMI in, IR Blaster: These are all common across the Xbox One X and Xbox One S. The Xbox One S actually used a 2.0a HDMI out, which was an upgrade on the original 2.0 4K output. The 2.0b is another refinement on top of that. The 1.4 HDMI in is still capable of handling 4K images as far as we understand. The only thing missing from either of these consoles that was on the original Xbox One is a Kinect port, but this can be replaced with an external cable. The IR blaster is now in-built.



greatly-loved franchise and the other a brand new IP from one of Microsoft's best-loved developers, Rare – but neither has captured the imagination in the same way that Sony's new RPG did. And looking forward Sony also has the stronger-looking exclusive line-up with games like *God Of War* and *Spider-Man* already getting a lot of attention.

We can't help wonder if there's something more that Microsoft could be doing to attract developers beyond the ID@Xbox service and the way in which it supports teams with dev kits. "That stuff helps, but really, why wouldn't you port to Xbox anyway?" asks Monomi Park co-founder and *Slime Rancher* designer Nick Popovich. "Assuming you haven't opted into an exclusivity deal, it's a win-win. There's tens of millions of potential players on the platform. I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a reason not to go for that." *Slime Rancher* has already taken advantage of the Xbox Game Preview program and Games With Gold to help it get into the hands of Xbox Gamers to a lot of positive feedback.

And we shouldn't underestimate the coup of attracting *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* to the Xbox One as well. This is one of the biggest games of the year so far and it hasn't even been given its final release yet. It's challenging some of the most popular games on Steam for multiplayer numbers with its devilishly simple and engaging battle royal format and it seems destined to be an explosive hit for Microsoft too as it launches through ID@Xbox. For Xbox players who haven't had a chance to check this experience out on PC yet, this is going to be an essential purchase.

DOES 4K REALLY MATTER?

Given that neither Sony or Microsoft seems to be pushing their respective power-house consoles as their primary sellers, we have to ponder again the worth of 4K resolutions when gaming. From our experience with 4K screens and seeing titles run in full resolution with HDR and at 60 frames per second, 4K is mightily impressive. Some have questioned whether it's as big of a deal as the jump to HD last generation, but Popovich has a pretty conclusive take on that; "Try playing a game on your TV in 480p and see if you miss 1080p." »

Meanwhile Ward seems to be pretty optimistic about the growth of 4K adoption in terms of TV sales. "Well, our survey data suggests that in most developed countries at least, the penetration rate of 4K TV ownership is now over 10% among gaming households," he explains. "So this obviously isn't a massive number, but it is growing at a healthy clip, and owners tend to be fairly hardcore in terms of their gaming behaviour and spending levels."

We recently had the chance to play around with the Xbox One X in full 4K Ultra HD alongside a PS4 Pro to not only see the system running at full pelt, but also up against its nearest competitor and we have to say, it was impressive. Our first impression of seeing a game in action was that it was incredibly crisp and bright, which you would expect. HDR has felt a little mixed in its implementation on Xbox One S in our experience, but there was a density of effects and quality of lighting on display here that was far more engaging. Sitting alongside the PS4 Pro, the Xbox One S did seem to look a little better. There wasn't anything standout that would signpost that disparity, but it felt like the difference between a game running at its maximum potential versus running within itself. Everything was just a little smoother and consistent. Even when the game in question kicked up a gear and really started pushing the action there was no sign of struggle from the Xbox One X. It could handle anything that was thrown at it.

But what about those who aren't ready to invest in a new TV. Is the power that this system offers enough? "Sure, the hardware is clearly the most potent that's graced a living room to date," says Ward. "There are plenty of hardcore gamers that will want to take advantage of true 4K gaming and for watching videos and so on, beginning this holiday and beyond, and will be willing to pay $100 more than a PS4 costs for this superior experience."

We have to say we're in full agreement with Ward on this one. As **games™** has expressed in the past, no one should underestimate the attraction of power for most gamers. More is simply more, and if you tell us that there's a system more powerful than anything else on the market that is capable of playing all of our favourite games better than before, we're not going to ask too many questions beyond 'How much is that going to cost us?'

"FROM OUR POINT OF VIEW, THE XBOX ONE X HAS A LOT GOING FOR IT IN TERMS OF ITS SPECS AND OVERALL SELECTION OF GAMES"

What about from a developer perspective, though? Has the Xbox One X offered game creators anything new that they weren't able to tap into before? "That's the tricky part," admits Popovich. "Games have to run on both platforms, so you can't really utilise [Xbox One] X for changing up gameplay as then it wouldn't match the experience of the original. So it seems like you can only focus on visuals and load times and such.

"An example would be that if the [Xbox One] X could say, fit 50 more players in a battle in *Battlefield 1* over the original Xbox One – it can't, because it still needs to play with Xbox One." And he would like to be able to use the Xbox One X for more exclusive features if he could. "I'd love to be able to use that horsepower for something other than visuals. And maybe I'm misinformed here, but everything I've read suggests the game experiences on both need to be unified."

That's our understanding too, but history tells us that while there is usually a call for parity in the short term, when a disparity of power emerges and becomes more embedded it will inevitably lead to experiences that can only be achieved on one system. We're not expecting any Xbox One X and PS4 Pro exclusive titles in the next year or so, but in two or three years we would be surprised



The stunning *Forza Motorsport 7* is going to be a fantastic showcase of the power of the Xbox One X with its detailed car interiors and high-pace racing action.

THE KEY GAMES

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR AND WHAT'S COMING NEXT

READY AT LAUNCH

Agents Of Mayhem (4K, HDR)
ARK: Survival Evolved (1080p, HDR, 60 FPS)
Dishonored 2 (4K, 30 FPS)
Doom (4K, 60 FPS)
Elite Dangerous (4K)
Fallout 4 (4K, 30 FPS)
Final Fantasy XV (4K, HDR)
For Honor (4K, 30 FPS)
Forza Horizon 3 (4K, HDR, 30 FPS)
Gears Of War 4 (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
Ghost Recon: Wildlands (4K, HDR)
Halo 5: Guardians (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
Halo Wars 2 (4K, HDR)
Hitman (4K, HDR)
Injustice 2 (4K, HDR)
Minecraft (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
ReCore (4K, HDR)
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
Rocket League (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
TES V: Skyrim – Special Edition (4K, HDR)
The Witcher III: Wild Hunt (4K)
Titanfall 2 (4K, 60 FPS)
World Of Tanks (4K, HDR, 30 FPS)
Slime Rancher (4K)



LAUNCH WINDOW

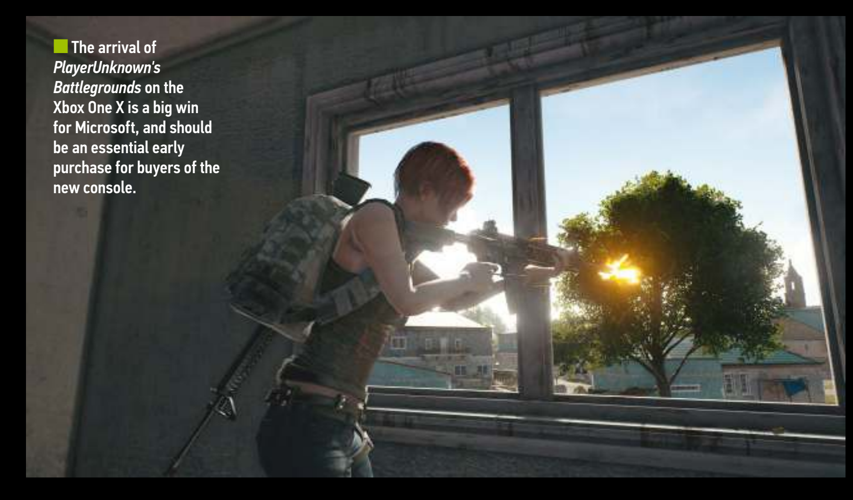
Assassin's Creed: Origins (4K, HDR, 30 FPS)
Forza Motorsport 7 (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
FIFA 18 (4K, 60 FPS)
Middle-earth: Shadow Of War (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
Need For Speed: Payback (4K)
The Evil Within 2 (4K, HDR)
PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (4K, HDR)
Call Of Duty: WWII (4K, 60 FPS likely)
Star Wars: Battlefront II (4K, 60 FPS likely)
Super Lucky's Tale (4K, 60 FPS)
Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus (4K, HDR)



COMING 2018

Anthem (4K, HDR, 30 FPS)
Black Desert Online (4K)
Crackdown 3 (4K, HDR, 60 FPS)
Metro: Exodus (4K, HDR)
Ori And The Will Of The Wisps (4K)
Dragon Ball FighterZ (4K)
Sea Of Thieves (4K, HDR)
State Of Decay 2 (4K, HDR)
The Artful Escape Of Francis Vendetti (4K)





The arrival of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* on the Xbox One X is a big win for Microsoft, and should be an essential early purchase for buyers of the new console.

if there was nothing that demanded the full horsepower of these consoles.

WHAT ABOUT VR?

One area that Microsoft has yet to move on is VR, which is already looking well established on the PS4 with a growing list of innovative and interesting games. What it might still be fair to say, though, is that there's nothing essential on VR yet, and that may be why Microsoft is keeping its powder dry on VR for the time being. The company is known to be working on its own Augmented Reality (AR) system called HoloLens and is fully supporting third-party VR headsets through Windows, so there's certainly not a lack of interest, but it does appear to be holding fire for the moment.

"It will support VR in 2018," insists Ward. "Microsoft didn't want to confuse the message at E3 and so it completely sidestepped VR. Xbox One X will certainly add VR and AR gaming and entertainment options down the line, however, and I suspect these features will arrive in 2018."

That argument makes a lot of sense to us. The launch of PlayStation VR and PS4 Pro last year felt a little congested for Sony, and it's possible that Microsoft wants to give the Xbox One X some breathing room so it can establish its base on its own. But the company has always said that this console is built ready for VR support out of the box, so it would be strange if that promise wasn't fulfilled within the first year of the console's existence.

What we suspect is that Microsoft is waiting to see some stabilisation in the VR market and to see some solid genres emerge that not only showcase the format well, but also offer something genuinely new that can't be experienced in any other way. We've had a few VR games that play in that water, but nothing that's really emerged as definitive. It might be nice for Microsoft to attempt to lead the charge in that direction, but right now it seems happy to hold back and see what happens. We would imagine it might also be waiting to see what new technologies emerge and become established that can take cables out of the equation, giving VR an even more living-room friendly feel.

COMPETING WITH PS4 PRO

So the Xbox One X is impressive, but may be too late to see the brand launch any real comeback against the PS4 in the next few years. Still, it might yet prove to be more successful than the PS4 Pro. "Speaking only to the upgraded consoles, I think the [Xbox One] X is a much more obvious 'upgrade' than the PS4 Pro," is Popovich's assessment. "But again, how we're allowed to use this new hardware is a bit muddy at the moment." Then again, Ward thinks that despite the difference in price between the rival Sony and Microsoft consoles, the Xbox One X actually represents good value for what you're getting.

"Well, they may well be losing money on the hardware out of the gate," the IDC analyst reveals. "Our component teardown suggested a retail price of at least $600. So yes, it's expensive relative to traditional home console norms, and yes, that will cause some people not to buy it, but given the hardware specs I think $500 is a great deal."

From our point of view, the Xbox One X has a lot going for it in terms of its specs and overall selection of games that will take advantage of its features. It doesn't have a killer app – a game that would attract attention to the system regardless of its raw numbers in the way that a new Halo might have done and that's a shame. But perhaps its more important contribution might be as a leveller of the playing field and establishing 4K as the new standard for the industry. So long as there are major players holding back from making those technological leaps forward there will always be a reluctance on the part of publishers to back those formats, but with 4K now the cutting edge for PC, Xbox and PlayStation, there's no excuse. Everyone knows what they're working to now. The Xbox One X is the most powerful console on the market and, as such, is the benchmark for multiformat gaming for at least the next few years. We've had a year or so in a kind of Ultra HD limbo waiting for this to happen, but from now through 2018, we're officially in the age of 4K gaming and that's very exciting indeed.

15 WAYS FAR CRY 5 IS MAKING A MESS OUT OF AMERICA



Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Release date:** 27 February 2018 **Format:** Xbox One, PS4, PC

***Far Cry 5* is heading stateside and none of us are prepared for the fallout.** We've played a few hours of the upcoming 2018 release, shooting through hundreds of radicalised cultists and tearing apart small town America as we looked to get a sense of how the series is improving and evolving after a lengthy spell out of the spotlight.



UNCHARTED TERRITORY

01 There are only so many biomes on Earth. From its earliest incarnation, the Far Cry series has always built its frenetic action around one simple conceit: to let players leave a bloodied stain on some of the most beautiful locations in the world. From Micronesia to Central Africa; an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean to the sprawling beauty of Himalayas; each of Far Cry's destinations could, thus far, have been inspired by a creative director at Ubisoft Montreal overhearing one of the studio's millennial interns recalling a gap year adventure around the water cooler. But *Far Cry 5* is different; the action is coming closer to home than ever before, and the result is as arresting as it is impressive.

COURTING CONTROVERSY

02 The Far Cry games have always had a tendency to court controversy, but never has Ubisoft Montreal waded so colossally into current political and societal discourse. Given that the studio has been eager to leap into an American locale since 2012's *Far Cry 3* – with this game's story and concept in incubation from late 2014 – we can't imagine it ever expected to find itself caught holding a mirror to the world. In *Far Cry 5* we will find ourselves tasked with wiping an extremist religious cult off of the face of small-town America before it swarms out across the entire nation. Given that this kind of extreme anti-government action isn't uncommon in America, *Far Cry 5* isn't just playing with fire this time – it's emptying a tanker full of gasoline onto an already raging inferno.

HOPE COUNTY

03 The action is going to take place across the fictional area of Hope County, Montana. A team of developers spent weeks in a very real Montana gathering information, taking photo references, and completing interviews with locals. It came to the realisation that Montana's lush forests, sprawling mountains and farmlands would make the perfect locale for a Far Cry game. Oh, and the small contingent of religious zealots and anti-government residents it discovered on the fringes of the state was an added bonus.



SHERIFF'S DEPUTY

04 The Far Cry games have had this tendency to thrust you into the wrong place at the wrong time as the framing device behind its cascading chaos and monstrous destruction, procuring weapons, ammunition and allies on site, but this time around you'll actually be somewhat prepared for the task at hand. In *Far Cry 5* you'll take on the role of the Sheriff's deputy, part of a task force assembled to liberate Hope County and arrest the ringleaders of the cult that is threatening the state's liberty and freedoms.



CULT CONNECTION

05 The action of *Far Cry 5* will see you engaging with the followers of Eden's Gate, a militaristic doomsday cult fronted by Joseph Seed. The radical preacher believes that he can lead the people of Hope County to salvation and he's doing so by any means necessary – operating under the guise of 'The Father' and aided by his siblings, 'The Heralds', John, Faith and Jacob. *Far Cry 5* will see you teaming up with the local rabble in an attempt to topple the regime.

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

06 The friends you make in Hope County will act as your backup, each bringing something new to your destructive arsenal. As we've witnessed first hand, these 'Guns For Hire' will give you more strategic variation to the anarchy of *Far Cry 5*, adding more firepower to your arsenal, giving you more tactical variation and altering your approach to combat situations. Ubisoft Montreal has promised that these characters aren't just quest givers, but actual characters in the world, adapting and evolving as the state of play changes in the game world.



GORGEOUS DESIGN

07 One thing that is particularly impressive about *Far Cry 5* is just how far Ubisoft Montreal has been able to push its proprietary Dunia Engine, It is enabling some, frankly, incredible results, drawing particular attention to the density of the environments and foliage. Lighting and shadow was also noticeably improved over *Far Cry Primal*, while some of the horizons – particularly when viewed from the sky – looked like they had been ripped from real b-roll recordings of Montana.



WORLD BUILDING

08 Ubisoft is promising a more cohesive world this time around, with small hub areas full of local residents being far more reactive to your presence and in-game accomplishments than we've perhaps seen in Far Cry before. It was, admittedly, difficult to get a sense of this from our time with the game, but areas – once liberated – certainly felt more alive. Whether this comes together to form a cohesive whole, to actually bring anything extra to the experience, remains to be seen.



GOOD DOGS

09 As long time readers will no doubt know by now, **games™** is easily won over by good dogs and *Far Cry 5* features one of the very best boys. Your new bestie – the game names him Boomer, but we will see about that – will scout for weapons, distract enemies and generally cause enough chaos for you to slide into cover and out of the firing line. He's a great companion, but he also disappears once you jump into vehicles, reappearing at your final destination; this isn't good enough, we want to see Boomer in the passenger seat at all times. Immersion is really important, okay.



BAD HOMBRES

10 We walked away from our time with the game extremely impressed by the enemy AI. While the game's fundamentals are essentially that of *Far Cry 3* and its sequel, everything has received a noticeable upgrade and refinement. The enemies might be a bunch of untrained lunatics, but they are also aggressively intent on completing their mission. It's easy to get overwhelmed, pinned down by gunfire flooding in from all directions. Rush into an encounter and you'll find yourself feeling the pressure, desperately searching for a way out of the mess you've created. Combat is going to be intense in *Far Cry 5*, and that's exactly how we want it.



POWERFUL WEAPONS

11 Say what you will about Far Cry, but *goddamn* does it have some of the best gunplay in the industry. The assault rifles, shotguns and pistols feel hefty, immediately giving them a sense of power and purpose in the world. Aiming was comfortable when firing from both hip and sights, while the weapon feedback itself was particularly impressive, you can really feel the weight of every one of your motions pushing back against your thumbs and rattling through your hands. *Far Cry 5* pulls you into the bombast of its unique scenario through its weapons, each a real destructive delight to wield.

SOUND DESIGN

12 If ever there were a game to invest in solid headphones or a sound system for it is going, surprisingly, to be *Far Cry 5*. Honestly, we were a little taken aback by the sound design of Ubisoft Montreal's latest. Combat *feels* immediate and dangerous because of it, with bullets slicing the air and explosions rattling through your ribcage as the chaos increases. It also adds extra weight to your weapons, tying into the improved mechanical feedback; the first time you fire a shotgun you'll *really* know about it. Given the somewhat realistic setting and subject matter, it was honestly a little surprising to hear such a realistic depiction of firearms in a naturalistic setting.

COVER TACTICS

13 With enemy and wildlife AI more aggressive, not to mention the gunplay more ferocious and frantic, you'll need to place real importance on your positioning in the world. Environmental destruction is more prevalent here than in any Far Cry game before it, with bullets slicing through barriers and low cover. Thankfully, moving into cover – leaning out of and around corners to let off suppressive pop-shots – feels fantastic, while sliding into and vaulting over objects in the environment is incredibly natural, and an effective tool in your arsenal.



TOP GUNNER

14 One quest in our playthrough saw us tasked with flying over the rolling hills of Montana in what was essentially an old biplane, blowing up towers, convoys and, finally, engaging in a thrilling dogfight while thundering Eighties rock music pumped through our headphones. Flying has been drastically improved over previous games in the series; there's a huge sense of scale once you're up in the air, the thrill heightened by the control given to you – a real movie moment.



LINGERING FEAR

15 There is now a lot of pressure on Ubisoft Montreal to deliver. *Far Cry 5* has thrust itself into a very sensitive state of affairs, and there are going to be plenty of people keeping a close eye on how it handles the subject matter. Ubisoft isn't known for its subtlety and that may be something of a problem in the long run, but as it stand *Far Cry 5* is walking a dangerous tightrope, regardless of whether it commits itself to a particular political message or has anything meaningful to say on survivalist or doomsday movements.

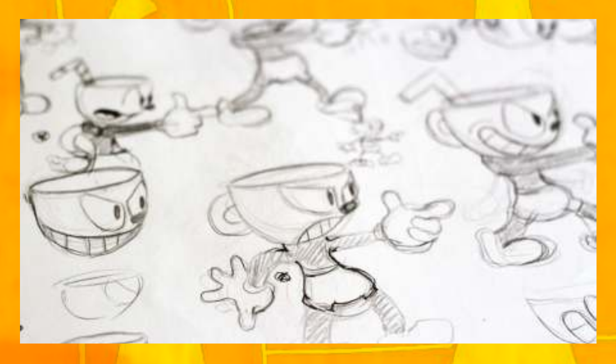






THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

WE GO BEHIND THE SCENES WITH STUDIO MDHR TO DISCOVER HOW A SMALL INDEPENDENT EXPERIMENT WITH A BOLD IDEA WAS ABLE TO BECOME ONE OF THE BIGGEST GAMES OF THE YEAR





Studio MDHR clearly had no idea what it was getting itself into. That we can say now with some degree of certainty. Founders Chad and Jared Moldenhauer had never made a videogame before, nor did they know how to, they only knew that they liked playing them. Many of the artists brought into the fold had also never been involved in active game creation before, but they were experts in a particular style of animation that had long been considered dormant; each of them headhunted to help create something that this industry has never seen before. And, truth be told, it will likely never see again.

Cuphead isn't like anything else out there and for good reason. Created by a team of passionately-inexperienced game makers, *Cuphead* pays homage to the likes of *Gunstar Heroes*, *Contra III*, and the Thunder Force series, built – quite literally – from scratch, by hand. Heavily inspired by cartoons of the Thirties for its look and feel, wherein the visuals and music would be painstakingly created with the same traditional design techniques that defined an era of visual animation and twisted the imaginations of a generation. To achieve this, every frame of *Cuphead* would have to be a traditionally hand-drawn animation cel, every action looped over meticulously-painted watercolour backgrounds. Why has *Cuphead* missed so many of its deadlines over the years? We're betting that you're beginning to get an idea.

But Studio MDHR persisted, through the difficulties, the delays, and reams and reams of paper to create *Cuphead*. It has been a true project of passion, driven by an entrenched creative vision and a labour-intensive approach to production, but the end result is as unforgettable as it is visually disarming. For Studio MDHR, it was going to do *Cuphead* right or it wasn't going to do it at all. "We kind of went all-in on this," laughs Marija Moldenhauer, speaking with **games™** as the studio crunches in preparation of final certification. "We were more excited than worried about making this leap of faith. We figured that this was our opportunity, our one shot to make a game that we loved – that we were proud of. We didn't want to be in our retirement years wondering what could have been."

When you see *Cuphead* in motion, when you learn about the process and expertise behind its transformative Thirties art-style and retrograde action, you'll begin to wonder how Studio MDHR ever made it through to the end. But what you will come to understand is the truth in one particular idiom: that the devil truly is in the details.





Method behind the madness

It can take, on average, 25 minutes of work to produce a single frame of *Cuphead*'s gameplay. To give that some context, back in 2015 the Moldenhauer brothers had estimated that *Cuphead* would feature around 15,000 individually hand-drawn frames when it shipped; when we ask them now, years after that estimation was made, long after the game's scope expanded wildly from a meagrely-sized boss rush to fully-fledged platformer, we're told that it is in fact closer to 50,000. "It's pretty wild, right?" Chad would say, his rampant enthusiasm driving the art direction forward throughout development.

But the reality is that this process is painstaking. *Cuphead* is heavily inspired by vintage Fleischer Studios and Disney hand-drawn animation, by the works of ComiColor, Van Beuren, Columbia Pictures, Copley Pictures and many more. In order to really nail that aesthetic authentically, Studio MDHR would adopt the same production techniques that Fleischer and Disney popularised in the early Thirties; every single asset and animation – motion, movement and action – that you see in the game started life as a pencil drawing on a piece of paper.

Levels, characters, bosses, attacks and their animations, *everything*, is done by hand. If you were to see a maniacal carrot bearing hammers for hands spinning 360, for example, that isn't a 3D image being spun artificially in software, that's individual frames for each stage of the rotation – each of them needs to be individually drawn, inked, and coloured before being inserted into the game for that animation to be constructed and, eventually, played. This is not how videogames are traditionally made; this isn't even how cartoons are made anymore. There's a somewhat disruptive, anarchistic feel to the development of *Cuphead*. "It's definitely been a labour of love," Marija laughs, with what has to be the understatement of the year, adding, "oh, and a *lot* of paper."

"We just wanted to make a game that we loved, that we could be proud of. We never wanted to submit to the desire to just rush it, to do the work quickly to get *Cuphead* out there," she continues, going on to note that some attacks could involve upwards of 30 frames of animation to execute. Which, given the speed of the moment-to-moment play and the rapid pace that the screen will typically fill with all manner of projectiles, is pretty, well, wild. "If there is an attack in the game that is fully animated but it isn't fluid or it doesn't fit well it will get scrapped and we will start over."

Complicating matters further is the way in which *Cuphead* deals with framerate. Studio MDHR splits the rate in which the game's animations actively play (24 frames per second, the speed of traditional film and era-appropriate cartoons) from the actual framerate that the game runs and plays in (60 frames per second, to ensure smooth, fluid and precise action). "In wanting to remain as authentic as possible to how they did things in the Thirties we thought it was really important to be animating at 24 frames per second. So, for every one second there will be 24 individually-drawn frames, and they would just loop within that to make it 60 frames per second," she says, which is how *Cuphead* is able to get that strange, unhinged, almost David Lynchian-vibe to its movements. Most modern games will feature animation loops, but triple-A studios do their best to hide them, *Cuphead* does the opposite, revelling in the chaos that such a combination creates. It's a truly impressive work of art; complex and delivered with care, in every aspect of its very being.



"IT'S DEFINITELY BEEN A LABOUR OF LOVE, AND A LOT OF PAPER"

MARIJA MOLDENHAUER, STUDIO MDHR



■ Despite being heavily inspired by the run-and-gun games and bullet-hell shooters of the Nineties, *Cuphead*'s core play isn't a memorisation game, where boss patterns are always the same. It's much more reaction-based, and it's tough as nails.



■ Each of the level backgrounds have been entirely hand-painted and hand-layered, giving them a really surreal, quite beautiful quality. When the platforming sections were introduced, it meant entire new areas would have to be concepted, sketched and painted by hand.



Performance orientated

Marija is responsible, not only for production, but also for inking and cleaning up close to every single art asset you are likely to see in *Cuphead*. The team only has five full-time animators, one background artist and one digital painter; the assets in *Cuphead* are scanned in digitally once they have been drawn and inked to then be coloured in Photoshop, and that's the one and only modern conceit the team has had to make in the interest of actually ever getting *Cuphead* finished – the process of inking onto transparent cells and painting directly onto the back of the glass is pretty messy and very expensive, and the last thing the studio needed was any more complications to its design process.

But the results are immediately impressive. *Cuphead* has, even as the team has steadily grown over the years, still had the same ethos at the heart of it – the same devotion to sticking as close to a historical form of animation as humanly viable. This isn't something you can quickly jump onto Google and learn in a few afternoons either, it's a process that needs to be devoutly studied to gain a true understanding of the artistry and skill behind it. And that has ensured that expansion was never going to be easy, especially as the scope of the project grew in size and complexity.

"One of the unique features of our company is that we don't have a central office. Everybody on our team is located remotely and the main reason for that is because this [style of 2D animation] is a dying art," confirms Marija who hopes – along with the rest of the team – that *Cuphead* can contribute to keeping the style alive for another generation to study and enjoy. "We were not able to find animators who were classically trained, who still animate using a pencil and paper, this way locally to where we are based. So we had to kind of expand our horizon and our vision in trying to find people across North America. We have people out of San Francisco, LA, from DC, Toronto, New York... we really had to hunt for people that still do that type of animation."

This is just one of the reasons why *Cuphead* exists as such an anomaly. Why nobody has attempted to swoop in and copy its style over the years that fans have been eagerly awaiting its release. But, like Marija says, there's a crazy amount of love being poured into this project. "One of the biggest factors that might veer [other developers] off of this path is because of the amount of work that goes into it. Every single person on our team is putting in more than a full-time job – much, much more. I've said it before, but it really is a labour of love; you have to be passionate about it to do this day in and day out, and for the amount of hours and work ethic that goes into."





Behind the music of CUPHEAD

We speak with composer **Kristofer Maddigan** to get an insight into the music of *Cuphead*, which features over two hours of live-studio, original jazz recordings and uses a 13-piece big band setup, a ten-piece ragtime ensemble, a solo pianist, singers, a barbershop quartet, and a couple of surprises thrown in for good measure

HOW DID YOU APPROACH WRITING THE MUSIC FOR CUPHEAD?

The main thing for me when writing the music for *Cuphead* was doing as much research as possible before diving in too deep. Chad and Jared Moldenhauer wanted music that was less like the typical small orchestra/chamber jazz-style of Thirties cartoons and more of a full-on hyped-up, exciting big band-style.

Bosses were always going to be big band, but I wanted the world maps and platforming levels originally to be more in the ragtime vein, just to emphasise the differences. There was almost a kitchen sink approach to the music; anything went as long as it was more or less appropriate to the era.

WHO WERE YOUR BIGGEST INFLUENCES ON THE MUSIC?

As much as I was attempting to really listen to a large amount of the music, there were a few key influences that I really gravitated to the most, and went back to when I was looking for inspiration. Duke Ellington was arguably my biggest influence in writing the score. His courageous sense of inventiveness and experimentation were huge for me. The rags of Scott Joplin are pure elegance – there were many composers writing ragtime at the turn of the last century, but in my opinion his works are perfect.

Another obvious influence is Cab Calloway. His music has stood the test of time for a reason, and his singing, sense of style, and showmanship found its way into *Cuphead* in a big way! There are of course many, many other influences, but these were just a few of the big ones.

IS IT DIFFERENT WRITING MUSIC FOR YOURSELF VERSUS THAT OF A VIDEOGAME?

We were always aware that this was music for a videogame and not concert or dance music. It needed to sound like era-appropriate, legit big band music, but it also needed that quirky videogame angle. A lot of the rhythms and melodies are purposely a little off-kilter to jive with some of the wild visual elements of the game.

When you look at the incredible amount of research and exceptional creative work the rest of the *Cuphead* team is doing, I wanted the music to match that quality. We were all very conscious of being loyal to our influences, and doing everything right.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE PLAYERS TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR SOUNDTRACK?

The musicians that we got on board are at the top of their fields, and their talent, virtuosity, and personalities all really come through on each track. Jazz is ultimately a collaborative art form, and a composer gives up a certain amount of control when it comes to the amount of improvisation that occurs in the music. This was a project of love, and I do really hope that it also turns some people towards checking out jazz who weren't previously into it. If you like the music, please, search out some recordings from the artists listed in the liner notes, and check out the musicians who play on the soundtrack. Jazz and improvised music is still a living, vibrant art form, and there are many, many decades of it out there to explore. I'm sure you'll find something to suit your tastes!



STRANGE DESIGNS

"We basically started with pens, pencils, and a sketchbook. We would watch hours and hours of cartoons; there are two specific ones that we do want to call out as being the major influences that inspired *Cuphead*, and they are *Bimbo's Initiation* and *Swing You Sinners*," says Marija, explaining that the Fleischer Studios' work still resonates to this day, a force of creative ingenuity and impossibly crazy design. "We just watched hours upon hours, and endless hours, of those cartoons. Taking screenshots and analysing the line work, analysing the pen weights and the ink weights, it's all things like that for the initial research… and then we took all of that knowledge to the drawing board."

Walt Disney's *Silly Symphony* and Max Fleischer's *Betty Boop* are the clearest works that have defined what *Cuphead* has become. Those shows, and their associated spin-offs, are a rhythmic descent into absolute psychedelia – and this was years before LSD was first synthesised. The hallucinogenic quality, ferocious surrealism and morally unhinged nature to Thirties cartoons was born from a desire to do, well, just about anything the creators wanted. This was the majesty of the pre-Hays Code era of production – the Hays Code, which became strictly enforced in 1934, limited the freedoms studios had in their works in an effort to make cartoons more kid-friendly and socially acceptable. Before the code censored the genius of these works, it was a time where everything and anything was possible; anything could happen in a Thirties cartoon, and the same can be said of *Cuphead*. It's the unexpected nature to the characters that you encounter, where literally any object in the game can transform into some otherworldly manifestation of itself, that means *Cuphead* can reinvent itself in each and every scenario should it want to – and, let us tell you this for a fact, not only does it bloody well want to, it enjoys turning expectations on their head every opportunity it gets.

"For us, it was all about staying true to the era, to what cartoons were like in the pre-Hays era, where the rule was: the creepier the better," Marija says, noting that this didn't just apply to the sort of insane bosses and characters that you can see in the game, but even down to the way in which they were designed. "That eerie feel, the surrealistic approach… we studied a lot, and researched a lot, and really tried to stay authentic to that era of animation. For example, like, Rubber Hosing. In a lot of the characters, movements and bosses you'll see that there are no joints and bones, and we don't constrict ourselves to using physical anatomy when the character moves, and there is a lot less care for structure, so it lends itself to being a lot more creative in terms of what the characters and bosses are able to do.

"Many people that I talk to frequently say 'it must be so hard to do a game in this style', which it is, it's painstaking, to physically be doing drawing all day long. But from a creative lens it's actually a lot easier. There are no rules. We aren't constrained to realism. But we can be as out there as we want to be and as possible; the weirder, the quirkier, the better… there are just no boundaries and that's nice, to have that creative freedom."



"WE SAID, 'ALL RIGHT, LET'S GO ALL IN! LET'S GO BIG OR GO HOME'"

MARIJA MOLDENHAUER, STUDIO MDHR



■ Once a frame has been drawn, the page is passed to Marija Moldenhauer to ink, which sees her going over the original piece bringing the definition and shadowing into the piece with pens on glass. It's a delicate, time-consuming process.



ESSENTIAL **VIEWING**

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN GETTING A REAL FEEL FOR THE WORKS THAT INSPIRED CUPHEAD, THESE SIX CARTOONS ARE ESSENTIAL VIEWING

BIMBO'S INITIATION 1931



FLEISCHER STUDIOS

SWING YOU SINNERS! 1930



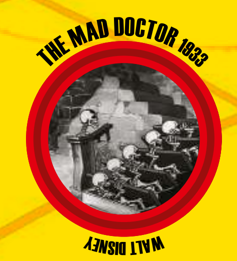
FLEISCHER STUDIOS

THE SKELETON DANCE 1929



WALT DISNEY

THE MAD DOCTOR 1933



WALT DISNEY

RED HOT MAMMA 1934



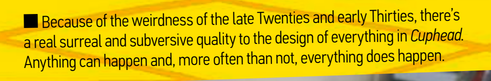
FLEISCHER STUDIOS

MINNIE THE MOOCHER 1932



FLEISCHER STUDIOS





■ Because of the weirdness of the late Twenties and early Thirties, there's a real surreal and subversive quality to the design of everything in *Cuphead*. Anything can happen and, more often than not, everything does happen.

Crafting play

Cuphead has changed dramatically over the years. But certain elements have been consistent – the art and the technique behind it, for example – but that doesn't mean it hasn't been subjected to new creative challenges at every step on the long road to release. *Cuphead* was originally envisioned as a boss rush game, featuring 'eight or nine' starring enemies. A proving ground of sorts, a way to see whether the appetite was out there for something more – it would have to do; back in 2012 the studio didn't have the time or resources to create anything bigger.

Studio MDHR began with three people and has swollen to include over 14 full-time staff stretched across North America. But at its genesis, work on *Cuphead* was completed in fleeting moments of spare time found between other work and life commitments. It was your reactions to the 2015 E3 showing that sparked a change in the team, pushing the Moldenhauer brothers to take *Cuphead* to the next level. "We quit our jobs, maxed out every loan possible, and partnered up with Microsoft. This allowed us to expand the team and produce a larger game," Chad Moldenhauer says of *Cuphead*'s origins. Switching engine from the XNA framework to Unity early in development was one thing, creating all of the assets necessary to support a larger game? That brought its own unique set of challenges to the table.

"As illustrated by the delay, the biggest challenge for us was time. The scope significantly increased and that was directly linked with time. In that, we needed more of it," Marija laughs once again, eager to impress upon us just how time consuming the design of *Cuphead* has been. "We needed more of it to fulfil our vision and make it exactly what we wanted it to be without sacrificing integrity or style. You know, we said, 'all right, let's go all in – let's go big or go home'. We quit our day jobs and just started going full-time on this to make the game into exactly what our vision was for it; I'm just so happy that that is what you're all going to be seeing very soon."



Cuphead now features triple the amount of bosses and full platforming sections, not to mention multiple overworlds introduced to replace the simple boss select screen it once had. While the game has clearly been driven by its artistic design, its core play has also been approached with a similar passion and dedication to getting the details right. Four designers are focused on fine-tuning small details – such as hit-boxes, weapon balancing, input response times and screen movements – in an effort to ensure that the game plays as good as it looks. And on 29 September 2017 we will find out whether the team's unwavering dedication to authenticity and its creative vision has been worth all of the time, passion and paper cuts delivered over the years. For better or for worse, there's nothing out there like *Cuphead* and, given the amount of work that has gone into it, we imagine there won't ever be one like it again.



LINKING TO THE PAST



25 YEARS ON FROM ITS RELEASE ON OUR SHORES, **THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST** REMAINS AS RELEVANT AS EVER AS A TOUCHSTONE FOR DEVELOPERS. **WE CAUGHT UP WITH A FEW INDIE RPG MAKERS TO REFLECT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ONE OF LINK'S GREATEST ADVENTURES AND HOW THEY HAVE TRIED TO BUILD ON IT**

"It's one of those games that I'll go back to, maybe not on an annual basis, but maybe every two or three years and complete again, just because it's damn near close to a perfect game." So says Alex Preston, founder of Heart Machine and creator of *Hyper Light Drifter*, one of the most striking and engaging tributes to the classic Zelda RPG style in recent memory, about his experience with *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*. And it's an experience that many of us share. Even after 25 years, the SNES instalment in Link's ongoing adventures in Hyrule remains an incredibly important touchstone for the industry, a mainline for inspiration and a foundation upon which great innovation can be achieved. We only need to look at the revival of the 2D, pixel art RPG as a genre to see that this is the case.

"I invested way too many hours into it when I was around 12 years old, in the only console I have ever owned, a Super Nintendo," remembers Javier Giménez, CEO of Digital Sun, maker of the upcoming *Moonlighter*. "I loved the game so much that, even if I remember quite a lot about it, I remember the feeling of happiness even more." There's certainly a lingering feeling of wellbeing and goodwill towards *A Link To The Past*, that's more or less true of most Nintendo hits from the era, perhaps stemming in part from playing it at a younger, more innocent age.



Hyper Light Drifter is one of the most visually arresting and challenging RPGs of this type we've enjoyed in recent memory. The combat is faster and more intense than we experience in *A Link To The Past*, the story darker and the detail greater, but the spirit of discovery is familiar.

All the developers we talked to could recall fond, sometimes life-changing, memories of their first experiences with the game.

"I remember pulling the cellophane wrapper off that golden SNES box and sacredly placing the cartridge into the system," recalls Nathanael Weiss, creator of the upcoming *Songbringer*. "My parents made me earn half the money needed for anything I wanted to have, so the games I owned were few and each of them cherished with reverence. Memories come to mind of

> "WHEN YOU KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS YOU CAN DO A LOT WITH THAT"
> **ALEX PRESTON, CREATOR OF HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER**

exploring and enjoying *A Link To The Past*'s delightful and seemingly gigantic world."

This is a feeling that has remained fairly consistent through the lifespan of the Zelda series, so we asked our panel of indie developers what they felt it was about this particular entry that has helped it to stand out from the crowd. "The kingdom of Hyrule was a character in and of itself," offers *Mayhem In Single Valley* developer Brian Cullen. "It was



OUR PANEL OF INDIES

ALEX PRESTON

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

Preston is the founder of Heart Machine and the creative lead on *Hyper Light Drifter*, one of the most successful and lauded releases in the 2D indie RPG revival in recent years.

BRIAN CULLEN

MAYHEM IN SINGLE VALLEY

Having played around with the RPG template previously with *You Are Not A Banana*, Cullen's upcoming game explores the challenges of real life through an adventure lens.

JAVIER GIMÉNEZ

MOONLIGHTER

As CEO of Digital Sun, Giménez is overseeing production on a smart spin on the classic RPG where you play as the local shopkeeper, selling goods to passing adventurers.

NATHANAEL WEISS

SONGBRINGER

Weiss is finishing up production on his ambitious, procedurally generated role-player, which you should be able to play soon (if not right now as you're reading this).



SOME MORE RETRO-STYLED RPGS

ON TOP OF THESE GAMES, HERE ARE SOME OTHERS TO CHECK OUT

THE BINDING OF ISAAC

DEVELOPER: EDMUND MCMILLEN, FLORIAN HIMSL
RELEASE: OUT NOW

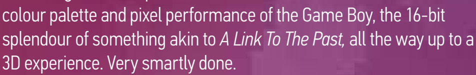
Going beyond even the gameplay and structure of *The Binding Of Isaac*, which is packed full of gameplay references to the Zelda series, the Switch edition of the game came with a fantastic instruction booklet designed in the style of a Zelda manual from the NES era. It was a nice tip of the hat.



EVOLAND II

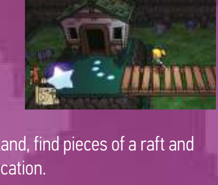
DEVELOPER: SHIRO GAMES
RELEASE: OUT NOW

Rather than simply having you jump through time in this ingenious RPG concept, you also jump through eras of RPG design. You'll experience the limited colour palette and pixel performance of the Game Boy, the 16-bit splendour of something akin to *A Link To The Past,* all the way up to a 3D experience. Very smartly done.



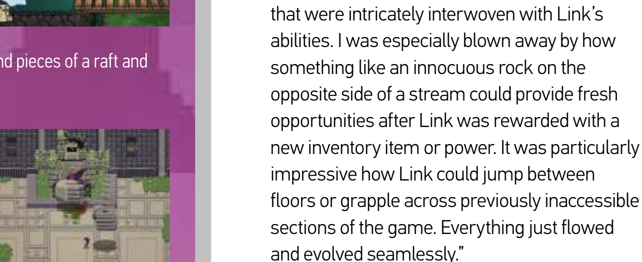


ITTLE DEW 2



DEVELOPER: LUDIOSITY
RELEASE: OUT NOW

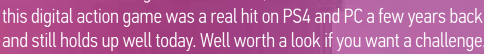
This simple action adventure offering honours one of the core tenets of Zelda and that's a simplified arsenal of weapons that focus your combat and puzzling options. You must travel the island, find pieces of a raft and finally get away from this mysterious location.



TITAN SOULS

DEVELOPER: ACID NERVE
RELEASE: OUT NOW

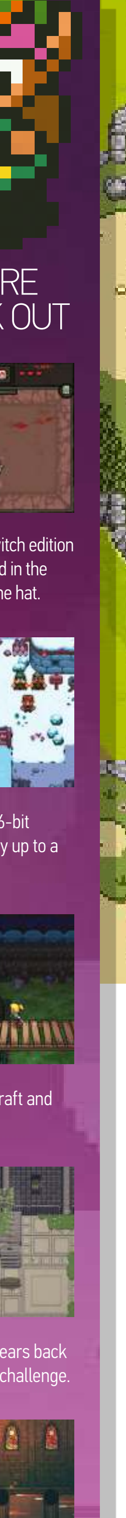
Mixing the kind of boss battle design that we've come to expect from the Zelda series with a touch of *Shadow Of The Colossus* and a smidgen of *Dark Souls,* this digital action game was a real hit on PS4 and PC a few years back and still holds up well today. Well worth a look if you want a challenge.



RADIO THE UNIVERSE

DEVELOPER: SIXESIXESIXE
RELEASE: TBC

Bringing more of a dystopian, cyberpunk aesthetic to the equation, *Radio The Universe* is another fantastic-looking game that's currently in development. The environmental hazards it's building, challenging twitch gameplay and bullet dodging we've seen so far is intense. Keep an eye out.



packed full of secrets and colourful characters that were intricately interwoven with Link's abilities. I was especially blown away by how something like an innocuous rock on the opposite side of a stream could provide fresh opportunities after Link was rewarded with a new inventory item or power. It was particularly impressive how Link could jump between floors or grapple across previously inaccessible sections of the game. Everything just flowed and evolved seamlessly."

"The biggest aspect that makes this game timeless is the simplicity in the design," adds Preston. "It's not just the gameplay and how that's designed, but also the aesthetic of the game, the art direction of all of the sprites and the tile work. There's a simplicity to it and a striking type of design to it, and it's not pushing for realism." It's for this reason that Preston feels that *A Link To The Past* has remained somewhat timeless despite its two and a half decades of existence; it knew what it was and that it was the very best version of itself, whatever the restrictions of the hardware.

"When you know your limitations you can do a lot with that. You can strengthen the components of your design that really matter the most," he adds.

"I also loved how what seemed like an incidental quest could reveal an entirely new mechanic," Cullen says. "Like when freeing the flute boy's bird provided Link with the ability to fly to any region. The entire game was a perfect orchestration of special items, magic, mechanics, characters, and story; where your efforts were rewarded with new layers of interaction and exploration, often between worlds or within familiar scenes."

Meanwhile Giménez still appears to be captivated by the pure adventure of the experience, saying, "I still remember how I felt whenever I found something new, or unlocked a new area, the sense of discovery and freedom was marvellous and I had never experienced that in a game before."

"There's really only been a few instances of that throughout my life that I've experienced with a game," Preston continues, spinning out from the idea that *A Link To The Past* was a rare example of a fully realised and complete world. "*Ocarina Of Time* was that same kind of experience or in that vein or realm, to a much



larger extent where I felt like I was exploring this entire world and I could do *anything* and there were so many possibilities. I'm just ensconced in this place."

But what of *A Link To The Past* being timeless? How does the rest of our indie development panel feel about that aspect of the lasting *A Link To The Past* legacy? "It's got to be the level of quality, the time and energy, the attention to detail that went into making it such a solid title," thinks Weiss. "It shows that if you put all you can into something, it can still shine even decades later."

"As in any other form of art, what creates a classic is pure quality," says Giménez. "Time passes slower for a movie like *Citizen Kane* simply because of how good it is. The same happens with *A Link To The Past*; it's great on so many levels that the memory of it remains."

"Like any piece of classic music or art, each element of *A Link To The Past* was created with equal care and attention and then reflected upon and re-designed until the entire package was watertight," Cullen concludes. "Craftsmanship like that does not age and I believe that is the reason why *A Link To The Past* is timeless, and it's also why it was the first game I re-visited (on YouTube) when designing my latest project."

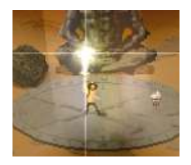




Which brings us nicely on to why we chose these particular developers to speak to about *A Link To The Past* in the first place; how they looked to emulate and perhaps even improve on what Nintendo achieved over 25 years ago. The idea of actually improving on perfection seems to amuse Preston. "Gosh, *A Link To The Past* is a near-perfect game and I don't claim to have a game that's anywhere as good as it," he insists. "As proud as I am of the game that we made, you know Nintendo had an experienced staff there and they made something that is beyond incredible. So, I'm lucky to be even a fraction of that level of design and sense of adventure and all of the things that it infused into it. For me, I really just wanted to put my own spin on certain aspects or take things that I didn't love about certain games or that I wish were in that game and put it in ours."

A big part of that has been bringing some modern sensibilities and technology to bear that simply wouldn't have been available at the time, let alone implementable on the SNES hardware. As it was, the SNES cartridge for *A Link To The Past* has been expanded from the usual four Mbit to eight Mbit (a whole one MB by modern calculations). Compare this to the list of technical elements that Brian Cullen has implemented in *Mayhem In Single Valley* and it seems almost archaic. "I aimed to push the level of physics-based environmental problem solving contained in *A Link To The Past*," he begins. "Aesthetically, *Mayhem In Single Valley* uses modern mesh warping for swaying trees, stencil shaders for pixel-accurate shadows, physics-driven particles, AA filters that maintain crisp pixel edges, complex layering interactions, and more. I also use the Fmod sound engine to allow sound and music to play a more pivotal role in the game world. Using the functions of a cassette player and collectible mix tapes the soundtrack will be interactive and affect stats and abilities, where techno music will boost Jack's speed while ambient music might reveal hidden items that sway to its rhythm. Jack will also be able to use a beat box to record and playback sounds to trick enemies and solve puzzles."

Mayhem In Single Valley has all sorts of complex background systems at play that wouldn't have been possible 25 years ago. For instance, it has a karma system that will affect you if you do good and bad things in the game.





Moonlighter puts you in the shoes of a shopkeeper in a town right next to a portal to another realm where adventurers are always passing through. In order to keep your shop well stocked with items for these passing heroes you need to head out there too and bring the treasures back for sale.

Similarly *Songbringer* is making big leaps forward in sound design to complement the fact that its worlds are actually procedurally generated, even though the base exploration mechanics are heavily rooted in Zelda fundamentals. "All the music for the dungeons is rendered 12 different times for each of the 12 music notes," explains Weiss. "That way each dungeon can have a slightly different vibe depending on your world seed. My dungeon one might be playing in the key of C# while your dungeon one plays in F#. This causes the game's download size to increase, but it adds an appealing layer of quality that I think modern gamers will intuitively resonate with, if not be consciously aware of. Though it would not have fit onto a cartridge."

"There are a lot of good things that designers have figured out. Like save systems, inventory management, dynamics of AI, aesthetics in some ways," adds Preston. "Trying to understand and learn from those lessons and instil those into our game design was important."

Weiss offers an example from his game; "In *Songbringer*, there are multiple ways to get past the gate blocks you will encounter. For example, the heat tiles, which knock you back if you don't yet have heat armour, can also be crossed by eating a cactus, using the level two blink orb, or by damage boosting yourself across the gap. By creating multiple ways to solve the same problem, I hope to empower players to overcome the challenges they face in various ways. As a game designer, that means players can break *Songbringer*, but that's okay because it was always intended to be played in multiple ways."

And that for Weiss is the key way he wanted to forge a new path based on what Zelda had done before. "This player empowerment

"CRAFTSMANSHIP LIKE THAT DOES NOT AGE AND I BELIEVE THAT IS THE REASON WHY A LINK TO THE PAST IS TIMELESS"
BRIAN CULLEN, CREATOR OF MAYHEM IN SINGLE VALLEY



A Link To The Past returned to what is considered the traditional overhead view from the original *The Legend Of Zelda* in part because Nintendo thought it would be easier to communicate the differences between the light and dark worlds from this perspective instead of the side-on view from *Zelda II*.

is how I want to enhance on what Nintendo achieved," he explains. "On *Songbringer*'s first screen, you can head in any direction. You can complete dungeons out of order, you can beat the game without completing all the dungeons, and most importantly, you can beat the game without the sword."

The other element that's come with time – beyond the technical aspects of game design and the easier access to resources – is that the games industry has matured in its storytelling scope and the themes developers feels they can now tackle with their work. *A Link To The Past* tells a classic hero story of good versus evil, which is another important reason why it remains so timeless and approachable after quarter of a century. These modern spins on Zelda often look for some other directions they can take the narrative, not least because using Zelda as their foundation gives them a firm base from which they can leap forward with more confidence.

"The unique visual perspective of the top-down RPG provides a privileged window into the lives of the character's that inhabit it," Cullen observes. "While Zelda works perfectly at what it does, I wanted to make an RPG that dealt with contemporary issues and more enduring issues relating to the struggles of everyday life and family. By re-visiting the retro RPG genre I could make use of that privileged perspective." And this is a really interesting concept, that the top-down view could almost be seen as god-like or at the very least voyeuristic. In *Mayhem In Single Valley*, it's the story of a boy dealing with family disharmony, anxiety and a character who is reluctant to accept the call to action that Link was so happy to leap out of bed for.

"RPGs exist in a liminal space between being very representational of the world – full of places, people and things – and existing as symbolic or iconographic presentations of the world, especially with regard to pixel art graphics and the reduced amount of visual information they provide," continues Cullen. "In this way, retro RPGs perfectly reflect how we live and exist in a halfway space between virtual worlds, such as in online gaming and social media, and our more direct everyday lives. *Mayhem In Single Valley*'s story explores themes relating to artificially constructed realities and for the reasons outlined above the pixel art RPG genre felt like the perfect fit."

"There's nothing wrong with a good versus evil story. There are some really good ones out there, but for me those aren't the stories that I want to tell," Preston tells us. "I live in a world that's very grey and there are a lot of different motivations to everyone's actions and I feel like those are important

WHAT MAKES A LINK TO THE PAST-A-LIKE?

THE ELEMENTS THAT HOLD THE HOMAGE TOGETHER

TOP-DOWN VIEW

While giving you a good overall view of the immediate area, the fixed camera, top-down view also leaves a lot of mystery at its edges. What exists on the other side of those trees or below you in the next section of the map? It's at once revealing and concealing information.

ZERO TO HERO

Link starts the game in bed and ends up having to defeat an enemy in two different realities. How extreme a rise from loafer to legendary hero of an entire kingdom (two kingdoms?) is that? Such journeys have been a staple of the series, but this one stands out as particularly impressive.

ITEMS LEVEL YOU UP

Traditionally Link doesn't earn experience points or invest them in a skill tree, he simply finds new tools and that makes him more capable. In this way the Zelda series relies on player skill and ingenuity, best exemplified by some of the puzzles in *A Link To The Past*.

PIXEL ART STYLE

The 16-bit art of the SNES has aged really well in a lot of ways and *A Link To The Past* is a fine example of this as its backgrounds and sprites still sing with personality. Modern graphics engines allow for even more personality to come through.

REAL-TIME ACTION

Unlike so many action RPGs of the era, Zelda was always about real-time combat and with *A Link To The Past* you also got collision detection that forced a little strategy into the mix. You could clash swords or hit a shield so you always had to think about your positioning.

"PLAYERS CAN BREAK SONGBRINGER, BUT THAT'S OKAY BECAUSE IT WAS ALWAYS INTENDED TO BE PLAYED IN MULTIPLE WAYS"

NATHANAEL WEISS, CREATOR OF SONGBRINGER

stories to tell as well. Even in a fictitious way, it reflects more upon our experiences in life in the day-to-day feelings. We have our villains and everything, but our villains can be sympathetic in many ways or you might even start to understand the psychology of their pursuits and their actions whereas in something like Zelda or older stories, simpler stories in games, it's very much 'this guy is an evil demon'. Okay, well that's fun and there are fun-ass stories that way, but again I don't want to tell that story. I want something with a little more nuance and relevance to what I experience and what maybe other people share and experience."

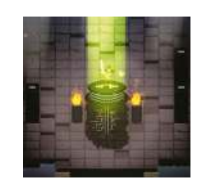
There are a number of classically-inspired RPGs that have either appeared in recent years or are close on the horizon, each of which seems to be attacking the genre while draped in the comfort blanket of *A Link To The Past*, knowing that if all else fails, so long as they can steer close to Nintendo's SNES classic, they can't be too far wrong. But what of the future? For his part, *Hyper Light Drifter* creator Preston thinks there's more potential in this particular format of game. "It's kind of like painting where, sure painting is a 2D process on a canvas and there's various canvasses you can use," he muses. "It doesn't always have to be an actual canvas; it could be wood or paper or something else. There are certain people who view that as a limitation, but infinite possibilities for painting still exist in fine arts or even in digital format. There's amazing 2D art still happening everyday, at all times, by a bunch of amazing artists and I feel the same way, but to an even greater and more complex extent, with 2D games."

"I think the best way for the RPG genre to make a real impact both on players and, if possible, the history of gaming is to expand the emotional and conceptual scope of the human stories being told," is Cullen's take. "While independent movies have succeeded in addressing modern topics and matters of the human condition, games – the fantasy RPG genre in particular – could benefit from a more introspective, philosophical, and contemporary take on the stories they tell and the mechanics used to tell them." Importantly, he still loves this genre and that's what is driving his analysis and criticism of the form. "I very much enjoy the pure fantasy genre and for me it provides a sense of true immersion beyond what any VR experience has provided so far; so the criticisms and hopes I have covered here are born from a place of love for the genre rather than anything else."

"Personally I would love to do more games that have ARPG mechanics, or managements mechanics, or pixel art, or rogue-like elements, but not all those at the same time again, we should try new things," says Giménez of *Moonlighter*, while Weiss is already thinking about expanding on his *Songbringer* debut. "I've already got plans for more games in the series," he enthuses. "The Milky Way galaxy of 13,000 years ago needs saving, man!"



Nathaniel Weiss is drawing from *The Legend Of Zelda* on NES as well as *A Link To The Past*, adding in the free movement and potential to play without the sword in the way Link's original outing did. The more directed opening on SNES wasn't his favourite feature.



The higher density of pixels that modern developers can draw from has allowed them to build impressively on the achievements of Nintendo on the SNES, but many have sought to maintain a vague retro look too.



CONVENTION VERSUS CONVICTION

WE SPEAK TO HAZELIGHT WRITER AND DIRECTOR JOSEF FARES ABOUT DOING THINGS HIS WAY WITH A WAY OUT

There are three good reasons to be excited about *A Way Out*. Firstly, we've never played anything quite like it – a story-focused game that can *only* be experienced by two people playing in split-screen co-op. We like new ideas. The second reason is that it is being written and directed by Josef Fares, a man who has already proven that he can deliver when it comes to games built on original concepts. He did so with the fantastic *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*. The third reason, is that we love the attitude that informs what Fares and Hazelight, the studio he heads up, does.

"A lot of people said to me in the beginning, how can you only do co-op?," Fares tells us. "You'll lose a lot of customers and blah, blah, blah. I don't care about that," he says. "I'm a passion-driven man. If I believe in something, I'll go with it, even if they tell me it's not going to sell. Even if they gave me a lot of money to make it single-player, I wouldn't do it, because it's not what the design of the game is.

"I told them, this is how it's going to be," he recalls of his meeting with EA, who is backing the project through its EA Originals program. "It has to be full creative control or not at all." Fares says that EA turned out to be great to work with and that "they never interfere with anything," but there's still something to admire in his refusal to compromise on his vision and his willingness to lay down the law to a company that he knew had the cash he would need to make this game.

That Fares has such a bullish approach to staying true to his vision and that he doesn't care whether making a story-driven, co-op only game makes sense from a business or marketing perspective is indicative of a refreshing approach to game design. He is convinced that if he follows his heart and explores the ideas that interest him, success will come.

That, Fares tells us, is how *A Way Out*, a game where two characters meet in prison, plan a breakout, then embark on a journey as fugitives, came to be. Fares and a friend were looking for a co-op game they could play together that wasn't a drop-in/drop-out experience where the focus is on levelling up, what weapons you're packing, and so on. "I wanted to play something with characters I cared for," he explains. Realising that such a game didn't exist, he decided to make it, enthused by the prospect that there are "a lot of things to discover from a co-op storytelling perspective."

"That's pretty much how Hazelight is, if you look at *Brothers* and then this game," Fares says in reference to *A Way Out*'s originality. "There are so many things in the gaming industry from a creative perspective that aren't discovered yet. That's what makes this job so much fun," he continues, explaining that he is sometimes surprised by the lack of games trying new things. "It feels like we would have seen more by now," Fares says.

In railing against the lack of originality in the games industry, Fares articulates a frustration that most of us have felt at one time or another. "We've come to a point where I feel that we immediately know when we see a trailer, 'oh I know what this game is,'" he says. Fares wants to make sure you can't do that with Hazelight's games and he believes it will be rewarded for it. "We really want something new. I'm very optimistic about that. You need games now and then that try something different. "

We can see the potential to do just that in *A Way Out*. Just as *Brothers* kept introducing new ways of using its unique mechanic, whereby you control two characters with one controller, we hope to see *A Way Out* play with the possibilities of two-player split-screen storytelling, surprising us, delighting us, and perhaps even subverting our expectations as we see the story of protagonists Vincent and Leo unfold. The potential we see here isn't just about the novelty of the core concept, as compelling as that is.

Brothers knew how far an idea could be pushed, when it could be given a little twist that gave it a new layer of intrigue, and when it should be tossed away in favour of exploring new possibilities. It didn't dwell on something longer than it needed to for the sake of pushing up the game's running time; once it got the mileage it wanted out of something, the game simply moved on. That's an approach we're hoping *A Way Out* will take and, listening to Fares talk, that is certainly the intention.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," says Fares, "but eight out of ten times, the game has started and I'm like, 'OK, here we go again'. You go back and forth and do the same thing, same thing. Why?!," he exclaims. "I don't want to play that! I'd rather play a diverse game that keeps me motivated, that keeps me engaged." That's why he wants *A Way Out* to be incredibly varied. It will feature shoot-outs, car chases, stealth sections, melee combat, and more, the idea being that you're always confronted with something fresh, your mind always kept stimulated.

Fares explains that each of the different elements included in the game will only feature so long as they remain fun or interesting, and because they make sense in terms of the story he is trying to tell. In other words, just because a lot of resources have been poured into making something, that's not an excuse to keep using it. Fares offers

up an example. He explains that the team have built a full shooting and cover system, but says that it won't be used repeatedly just to justify the time and effort put into making it. "This is not a shooter where you go around and shoot, shoot, shoot, and then a cutscene comes," he explains. "We have shooting, but only where it fits. We have a scene where you have just one person doing one part that takes one minute and it's only there," he continues, giving us another example. Over 300 character animations had to be created for that scene and they will not be re-used. "It is crazy from a developer perspective," Fares concedes, "but I truly believe that the players will appreciate this."

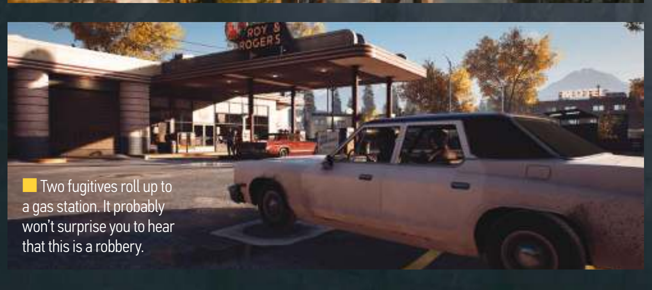
"I TOLD THEM, THIS IS HOW IT'S GOING TO BE"
JOSEF FARES, DIRECTOR

You could be cynical and suggest that all this talk of developers busting their arse to create one short moment for the benefit of their players, the desire to break the mould and try new things, to tell big publishers to stay out your business, and so on, is just a marketing ploy from someone trying to appear like they're on your side, but we don't think so. While the ultimate test will be when we get to play the game itself, the design sensibilities that inform *Brothers* suggest that Fares probably means what he says. Indeed, when you listen to him speak, his insistence that *A Way Out* will not be repetitive seems to be born of genuine frustration with games that don't respect your time. "I'm 39 years old," he says. "I don't have the time to put in and play a game for 100 hours".

You can hear Fares disdain for repetition in his hostility to another of gaming's sacred cows, too. "I don't believe when you hear publishers say 'replayability', blah blah blah," Fares says. "I mean, how often do we really replay games? I've played games since I was ten years old, I've probably replayed – I can count them on my fingers – max six or seven.







Two fugitives roll up to a gas station. It probably won't surprise you to hear that this is a robbery.

BEING FRAMED
BREAKING DOWN A WAY OUT'S UNIQUE SPLIT-SCREEN SYSTEM

At points, a third split-screen can appear to highlight an event of importance. If the cops show up in this scene, for example, a third screen will appear to show their arrival.

You'll normally share a 50/50 split with your co-op partner, but when an important scene starts, the divide will shift to dedicate 65% of the screen to that scene.

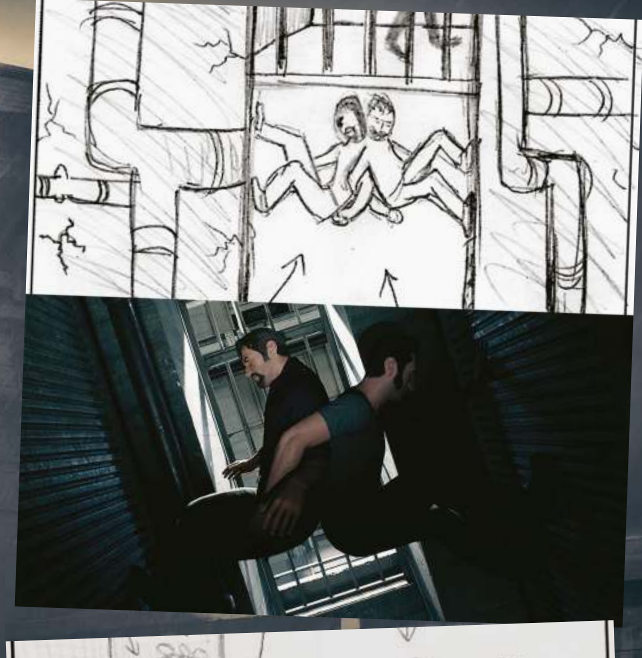
When your co-op partner is locked in a cutscene, you'll still be free to move around to interact with other characters and the environment.

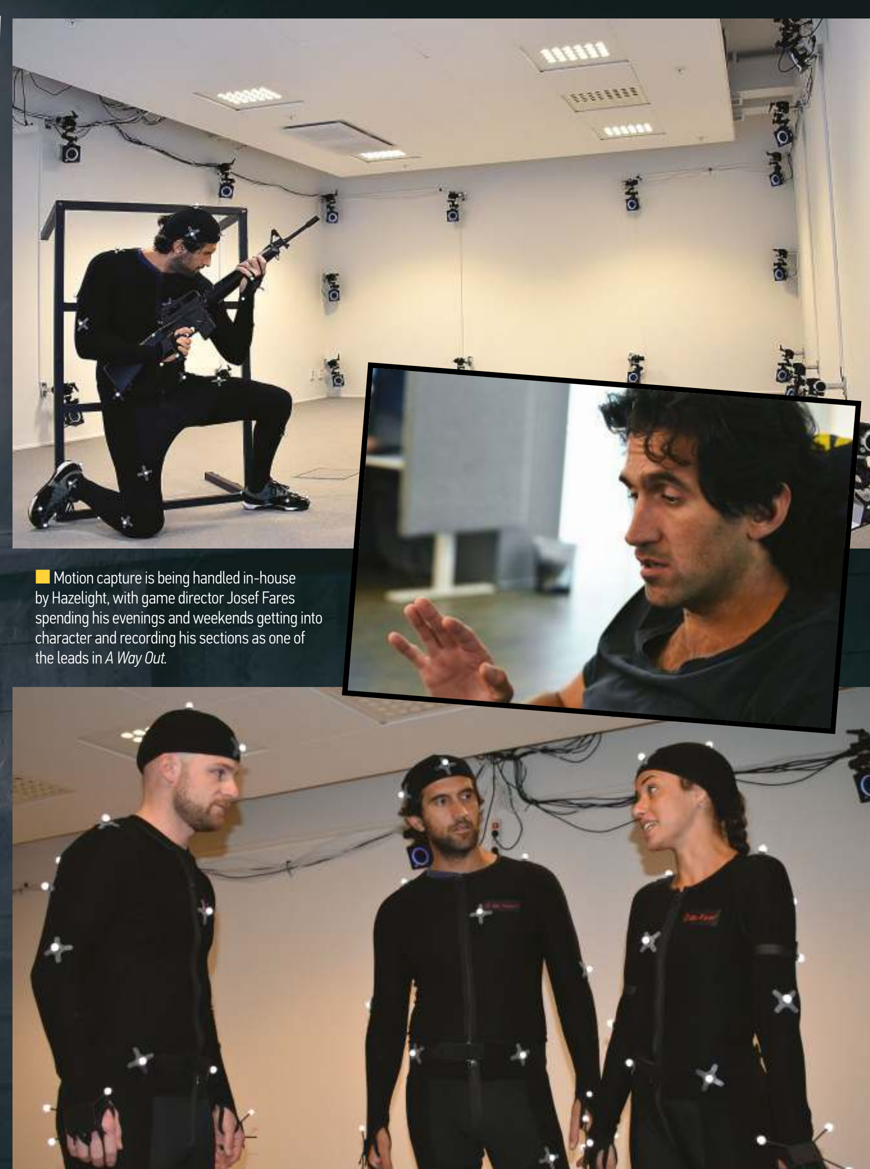




When a player is in a cutscene, they'll get almost 90% of the audio so that you can both hear important dialogue.

If you talk to an NPC while the other player is in a cutscene, subtitles will be used to compensate for the fact that they have most of the audio.

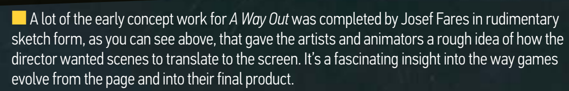




Motion capture is being handled in-house by Hazelight, with game director Josef Fares spending his evenings and weekends getting into character and recording his sections as one of the leads in *A Way Out*.







A lot of the early concept work for *A Way Out* was completed by Josef Fares in rudimentary sketch form, as you can see above, that gave the artists and animators a rough idea of how the director wanted scenes to translate to the screen. It's a fascinating insight into the way games evolve from the page and into their final product.



That's it. Sure, you have some hardcore players," he continues, "but all the statistics show that we hardly play games once. Why focus on replayability? Really?"

Ironically, *A Way Out* is a game that looks like it does offer the potential to be replayed for anyone so inclined. Take a scene where you and your co-op partner will rob a gas station. It begins with you and your pal having to make a choice about who gets the gun. Given that one of the characters, Leo, is far more reckless than his companion, Vincent, that choice alone can have a significant impact on how the scene plays out. Once the robbery gets underway, the decisions you make and the effectiveness with which you handle the task at hand means you could end up slipping away without too much trouble, or having to deal with the police.

The point, however, is that any replayability the game might offer is a happy coincidence. Hazelight's focus is on making that first playthrough as compelling and exciting as possible. The variety it has is about getting the best out of its unique split-screen storytelling approach in every scene, not about making sure those scenes offer extra replayable content. If that approach means that you feel like it's worth returning to, that's a bonus, not a feature that you'd plaster on the back of the box (or perhaps we should say, "the store page", given that this is a digital-only game).

Fares tells us that the choices you make in *A Way Out* are "not choices that affect the story, more choices that affect how to solve different situations". That's because he knows the story he wants to tell and is conscious of ensuring that nothing gets in the way of that. The actions you decide to take have to make sense for the characters he has written and the path that they will follow.

"Remember in the gas station, they have a gun in their hand," Fares reminds us. "People tried to shoot the customers, but what happens is your character shoots at the roof. You can't shoot people in the head," he continues. "If you want to shoot people in the head, go and play *GTA V*. You can't have a guy shooting someone in the head and then going

Don't think this is just a prison break game. That is how the game will start, but Hazelight says there's a lot to come after.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Josef Fares on why talking to NPCs is important for character development

"NPCs in the game are unique. Not only unique in what they say to each player but they also have unique animations; this is not a system that generates animations. So, every NPC in the game when you talk to them, that's been animated, mo-capped, edited. I hope people talk to them because these aren't NPCs that will just go, 'hey, go over there'. They are there for you to get to know your character, who they are. They are written quite short and quite funny, so it's fun to interact with them and I hope people do."





on and caring about his child, or whatever. It doesn't make sense."

You have the option of experiencing this story sat next to your co-op partner on the couch, or can play the game online. However, Fares insists that the former is the best way to play. "The reason is I think the way you talk to each other is important," he explains. "This is not a game where you talk about what level you are at, it's so much about the way you talk to each other. That's why I think the experience will be much better on the couch, where you actually have to sit together. I can't go into all the details," he continues, "but you will understand what I mean when you play it from beginning to end".

It's impossible to grasp exactly what it is Fares is getting at without playing the game for ourselves, but we get the sense that this is game that is intended to take place as much off the screen as it does on it through the debates and exchanges that *A Way Out* is intended to provoke.



JOSEF FARES, DIRECTOR

Remember that *Brothers* was a game that was very clever when it came to creating special moments through its mechanics – if you've finished it, you'll know it's not a stretch to say that the whole game is about setting up one memorable moment. We wonder if that's what Fares has in mind here? Perhaps there are moments he has in mind that can only be created in a co-op game like this, moments that rely on the dynamic between two players with different perspectives talking to each other about what they are seeing and what they want to do next? Perhaps the game is as much about building to those special moments between you and your co-op partner is it as about what happens to Leo and Vincent? We will see.

There is still some way to go until we get to find out in 2018, and there's plenty up in the air. Fares tells us that the team has got their heads around the key technical challenges and decisions – how do you deal with triggering events when you have two players wondering around? How much sound should each player have and when does that need to change? Do they need to worry about one player missing key information because they're busy doing something else while their partner is in an important cutscene? – but that there's plenty to get done before the game releases. That's why Fares can't say how long the game will be, other than that it will be longer than *Brothers*. He did, however, reveal that he would like for players to be able to sit down and finish the game in one sitting, though whether that will be possible, he still can't say for sure.

One thing Fares can say is that *A Way Out* won't be, as some have suggested, split-screen *Uncharted*. "If you tell Naughty Dog now, just update *Uncharted* with split-screen, that's like shooting them in the head man!" he jokes about the comparison. "It's not just like, split screen: Go! There are so many things to think about!"

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Reviews



68

UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY

Does Naughty Dog's adventure series work without Drake at the helm?



THE AVERAGE

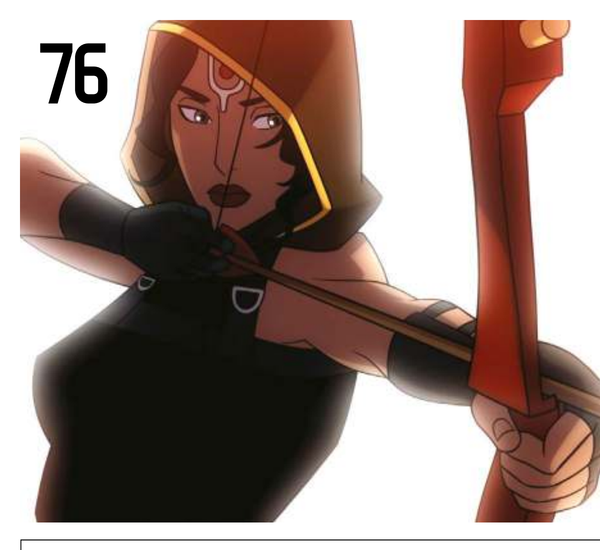
Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.


70


72


74


75


76


78

AGREE/DISAGREE?

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DRAKE'S ABDICATION

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

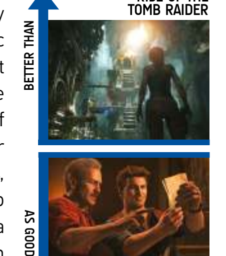
As an action hero, you can only cheat death so many times. Eventually, one of two things is going to run out: your luck, or the patience of the audience. While suspension of disbelief is not as important to Uncharted as to games that play things straight, maintaining a sense of possible peril is crucial to player engagement. Naughty Dog has employed some pretty neat tricks across its catalogue to keep that curtain up, the latest of which is a bold piece of recasting – Uncharted has auditioned plenty of replacements for Nate since it began and presented several strong candidates, with *Uncharted 4* again adding a handful of solid new options. And while the unlikely duo of returning fan favourite Chloe and *U4*'s no-nonsense newcomer Nadine might not have quite the same kind of chemistry as Drake and pals from the off, watching the pair evolve from secondary characters to star material over the course of the game is as entertaining as the adventure itself.

The Lost Legacy's origins as DLC for *U4* are hard to miss. It's practically identical on a mechanical level, all the way from core mechanics such as combat and climbing, right down to granular details like physically interacting with crowd members or realistic dirt build-up on other objects. A new cast and setting both help it feel fresh, plus these are not things to mess with for the sake of it – both traversal and gunplay were at their most evolved for the series in *Uncharted 4*, and there's no reason to expect a ground-up rework of these pillars in what is basically a mid-price standalone expansion. It's both mean and even reductionist to label it as such, though, as Naughty Dog has put in the work and turned

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Naughty Dog
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER



AS GOOD AS
UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END



Above: Combat is infrequent and often avoidable, with stealth a viable (and, on higher difficulties, preferable) option to ghost past most encounters altogether.

Below: Set pieces are as explosive and exciting as anything else in gaming – it *is* an Uncharted title, after all.

THE LOST LEGACY IS AS CLOSE AS UNCHARTED HAS COME TO GETTING THE BALANCE JUST RIGHT



FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Expect to get 8-10 hours from your first run, depending on how thorough you are.

Q. IS IT TRULY STANDALONE?
There are a lot of references to Chloe and Nadine's pasts, so Uncharted experience is recommended if you want the complete picture.

Q. IS [UNCHARTED CHARACTER] IN IT?
Yes. It's a *MGS2*-style bait-and-switch and you play as them after the first 30 minutes. Actual answer: play it and find out.

Below: What we saw in the game's reveal is actually the first chapter, although things can play out quite differently to the way they did in Naughty Dog's footage.



PICS OR IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Chloe seems quite snap-happy with her phone's camera over the course of the adventure – landmark photos serve as a collectible of sorts – so it's only right that the same thrill of capturing the moment be passed onto the player as well. In Sony first-party tradition, the Photo Mode here is best-in-class, offering everything from lens and exposure values to all the expected varieties of filter and frame. You can even play God if you want to create a scene that is just so, shifting the sun's position to better light a scene or removing certain characters entirely, all in the name of photographic perfection. The best part? Changing Chloe's facial expression – which you can even do with photos snapped in cutscenes – is a source of near-endless hilarity…

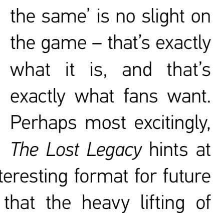
this into a complete game in its own right. Between a campaign around the length of that of the original game (read: eight hours or so on a first run) with a decent degree of replayability, *U4*'s entire competitive multiplayer suite and the new wave-based Survival co-op mode, this is a complete, value-for-money package.

The campaign is the clear centrepiece here, so let's break that down a little. Its shorter length compared to more recent games in the series allows some of the main criticisms of modern Uncharted – issues of pacing and padding – to be tossed off a cliff with a pithy one-liner. You will have your own idea of what constitutes a perfect balance of navigation, combat, puzzles, narrative and setpieces, but we'd argue that *The Lost Legacy* is as close as Uncharted has come to getting the balance just right. It's a leaner experience than *U4*, but also one open to trying new things with its gameplay as it does around halfway through. It's here that we see the proof of Naughty Dog's pre-launch soundbite about 'the largest play space it has created', the game briefly shifting towards sandbox design replete with optional areas collectibles, and even the series' first real side mission. It only takes an hour or so to clear out and there's an excellent showcase of variety among the activities so we heartily recommend doing it on your first run – although you can blast through the area more quickly if you wish.

Just as this large area serves to address pacing issues by making the flow player-controlled, other aspects have also been tightened up in line with this lean new look for Uncharted so that none ever really outstays its welcome. Combat is less frequent and way less forced than in Drake's last outing, with the larger spaces and greater verticality of *U4* still intact to allow for stealthy freedom, roaming encounters or a mix of the two depending on what players want. Puzzles too are tighter, typically either totally self-contained or tied to a single common theme that is established early, with tips offered by Nadine if it ever seems clear that you're struggling. Navigation's returning combo of convenient-yet-often-unstable handholds, piton-assisted climbing and grappling hook-powered leaps of faith remains stronger than anything the heroes attempt to grab onto in a moment of need, once again aided by a newfound brevity as the game cycles through activities faster than its parent title on account of being around half the length.

While its loop may be quicker and slicker, the fact still stands that if you didn't like *Uncharted 4* on account of its core gameplay, there's nothing here that will change your mind. To call it 'more of the same' is no slight on the game – that's exactly what it is, and that's exactly what fans want. Perhaps most excitingly, *The Lost Legacy* hints at what could be an interesting format for future releases. It's clear that the heavy lifting of development was done with the core game, allowing for a quicker turnaround for this shorter side-story, and it's a hugely successful first attempt to shift the franchise out of Drake's shadow. The studio's characterisation is as strong as ever here and looking to the future, there are as many potential new heroes for an Uncharted adventure as there are fictional MacGuffins and lost cities, so anthology-style spin-offs to mainline games could be the norm from now on. Whether Chloe and friends get another shot after this excellent leading debut or Naughty Dog deigns to throw more characters into the spotlight is kind of irrelevant at this point, though – this is proof positive that it's possible to retire a PlayStation icon while having their legacy live on.

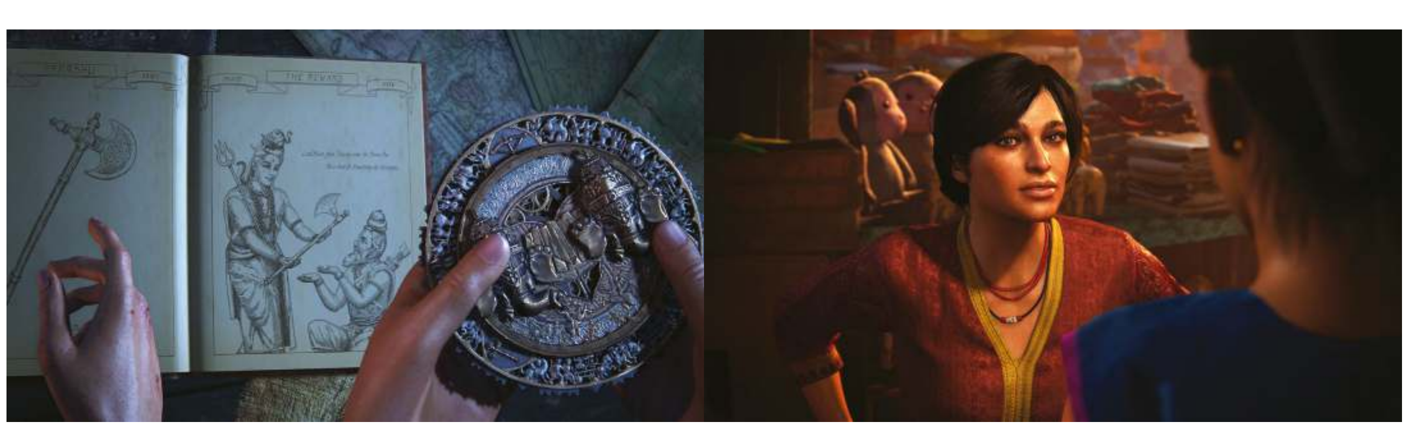
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE



OPENING UP: Having one large, open section really makes you appreciate the clearer direction of the rest of the game's design, as well as serving as a welcome change of pace.



VERDICT 9/10
CHARTS A CLEAR NEW COURSE FOR THE FRANCHISE





Above: The combat system here is really solid with Senua's speed making her a real threat against anything Helheim can throw at her. The feeling of parrying a blow from the monstrous warriors who loom over her never loses its lustre.

A WORTHY WARRIOR'S TALE

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

When entertainment has a cause it can, on occasion, become consumed by the drive to be significant at the expense of being approachable or enjoyable. No such claim can be laid at *Hellblade*'s feet as Ninja Theory has threaded the needle of being both incredibly powerful and enlightening on the subject of psychosis and mental health while also being an often-superb gaming experience that punches far above its weight.

While we can't necessarily speak to the authenticity of this game's depiction of psychosis with any authority, we can say that it is utterly compelling from start to finish. We know that Ninja Theory went to great lengths to involve experts, caregivers and people dealing with issues associated with mental health disorders on a daily basis to help inform its depiction. The way in which these things have been interpreted and funnelled through the medium of videogames is what is really potent.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ninja Theory
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Our now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

The most original element of this is in the 3D binaural experience of having voices in your head as you play (so long as you're using headphones, as recommended). They whisper and whimper, most often trying to dissuade Senua from whatever path is clearly laid out in front of you. Of course, you ignore them because this is a videogame and the only direction you have available to you is forward, but you can't help but associate this drive with Senua's mindset as if you're defying the naysaying spectres that haunt her.

But at other times they're actually helping you. They yell warnings in combat and they hint at what direction you should head in if you're trying to solve a puzzle. It's an unsettling and creepy experience at first to have these unknown figures communicate so intimately with you, whispering into your ears, but when they go you feel utterly alone and isolated. It's a fantastic effect that ties brilliantly into the narrative of Senua's journey and experience adding additional layers to its execution. And it's something that feels uniquely possible in a videogame. This sort of audio experience might be plausible in a movie or TV show, but it feels far more natural in this format.

THE QUESTION OF WHAT IS AND ISN'T REAL IS SOMETHING THAT HOVERS OVER THE ENTIRETY OF THIS GAME

The question of what is and isn't real is something that hovers over the entirety of this game; is Senua really travelling into Hel, fighting demonic Norse warriors, and hiding from beasts who hunt her in the dark? But this question is fed into the mechanics of the game in a way that merges the videogame form and the concept of psychosis in a really interesting way. The puzzles in the game largely revolve around finding symbols out in

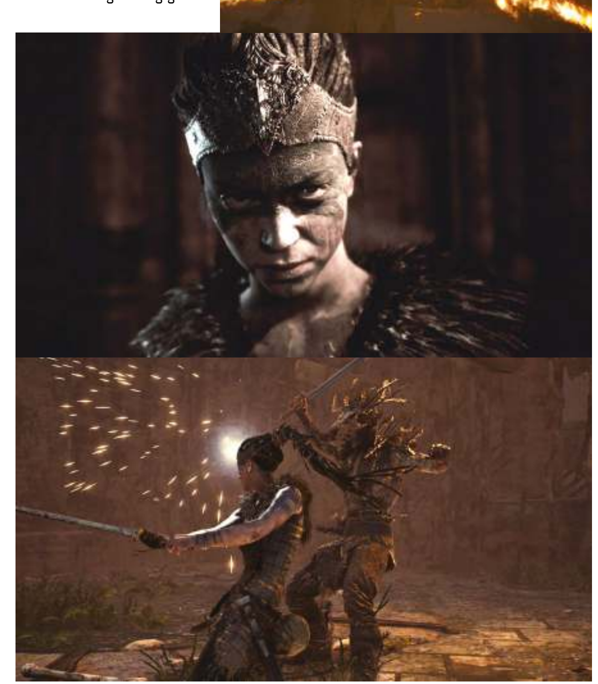
FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?
Maybe eight or so hours, but it's hard to say. Longer than we initially thought it might be, if that's worth anything.

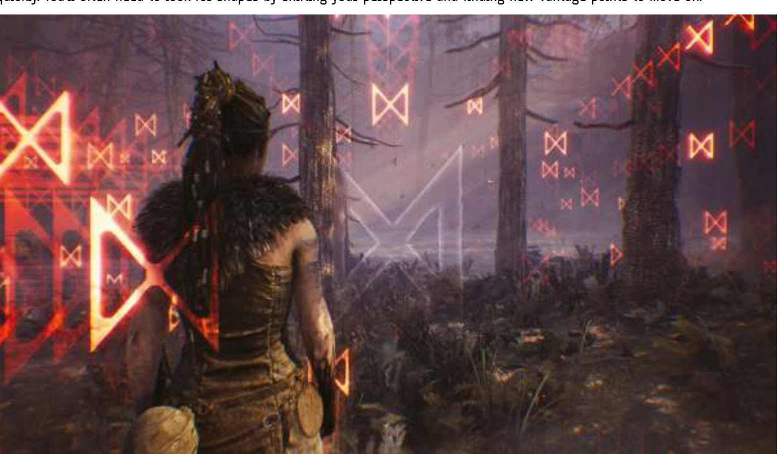
Q. WHAT'S WITH THE PERMADEATH TALK?
You heard about that? Yeah, the game says you'll lose progress if you fail too often, but don't worry about that too much.

Q. WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'DON'T WORRY'?
First, it's not such a hard game that this should really be an issue and second, it's an important element of the story. Just play it and see for yourself.

Below: The quality of the motion capture in this game is doubly impressive when you consider the limited resources available to Ninja Theory on this project. It's certainly a stunning-looking game.



Left: The contrast between the simplicity and familiarity of the early parts of *Hellblade* with the darker and more tormented landscape the deeper you go tells a story of its own. Again and again it's Senua's own mind that merges the two together. **Below:** If you've played any of *The Witness* then the environmental puzzles of *Hellblade* will have you feeling at home pretty quickly. You'll often need to look for shapes by shifting your perspective and finding new vantage points to move on.



landscape around you, similar to *The Witness* actually, and discovering these elements in the game was equally enjoyable. Another set of puzzles in the game revolve around perceptions of reality, walking through doorways that change how the world looks, opening up new paths. This could all be said to speak to a person who is 'seeing things' or making associative leaps that simply aren't objectively there.

When not looking for puzzle solutions to open doors and move on through the game you'll be making use of Senua's fine combat skills to dispatch those hellish Norse warriors we mentioned. As you might expect from a studio that has been playing in the action adventure field for some time, this is a real strength of *Hellblade*. Light, heavy and melee attacks can be combined along with a deeply satisfying parry mechanic. These warriors are all much bigger than Senua, but they are also slow and that allows you to duck and dodge your way around.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ALL IN YOUR HEAD: When *Hellblade* loads up it's going to encourage you to play using headphones and we'll second that recommendation. It's the best way to experience the 360-degree audio experience that Ninja Theory has created.

As strong as combat is mechanically, some of the way in which it is utilised through the game isn't great. Deeper into the game the rising pressure and challenge Senua is facing is largely signified by wave after wave of enemy being thrown at you. Towards the close of the game battles approach parody levels of length and frustration, but there's an argument to be had that this is part of the devices of the game aiding the plot and themes at its heart. We would caution against becoming too frustrated as the game wraps, although we don't want to give anything away.

Simply put, Ninja Theory has a message and every element of the game, from mechanics to plot, is serving it, sometimes to a fault depending on your tastes.

How the game mixes its use of combat and puzzles can sometimes feel a little drawn out, but is good on the whole. The early going is a heavy mix of both, but there's a fascinating middle stretch to the game where you no longer have a sword and the game becomes even more foreboding and thematically rich as a result. And then the god-killer sword, Gramr, is introduced and you're empowered with a weapon that takes out the weaker enemies in a couple of blows. It's a heroic feeling that really powers you through to the final act.

In places *Hellblade* can feel a little uneven in its execution, most often in fact when it appears to fall back on classic videogame solutions to how tension is built and endgames are ramped up. It would also be easy to criticise the level design as being a series of corridors, albeit some really wobbly and weird ones in places, with pretty heavily signposted combat areas. And on occasion some of the effects – film grain, hallucinations, transitions between world states – can feel a little cheap, as if they're hiding cracks beneath.

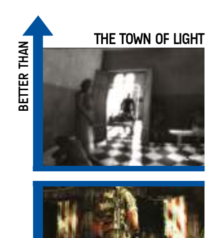
But *Hellblade* is so well executed in so many ways, so committed to its mission and has integrated concept and design so well that we found it easy to look past these things to enjoy it immensely.

IN THE EYES

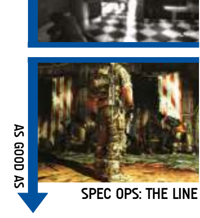
The story of Hellblade's development is one of a small team with plenty of triple-A development experience making a game with fewer resources all around. This might have had a massive impact on the production values on screen, but despite having to construct its own motion capture rigs and systems, this is one of the best examples of 3D scanning and capture we've ever seen. Senua, played brilliantly by Ninja Theory's video editor Melina Juergens, emotes and moves superbly and the reality of this character comes particularly through the eyes. Her gaze flitters and jumps around giving her a really life-like feel.

BETTER THAN

THE TOWN OF LIGHT



AS GOOD AS

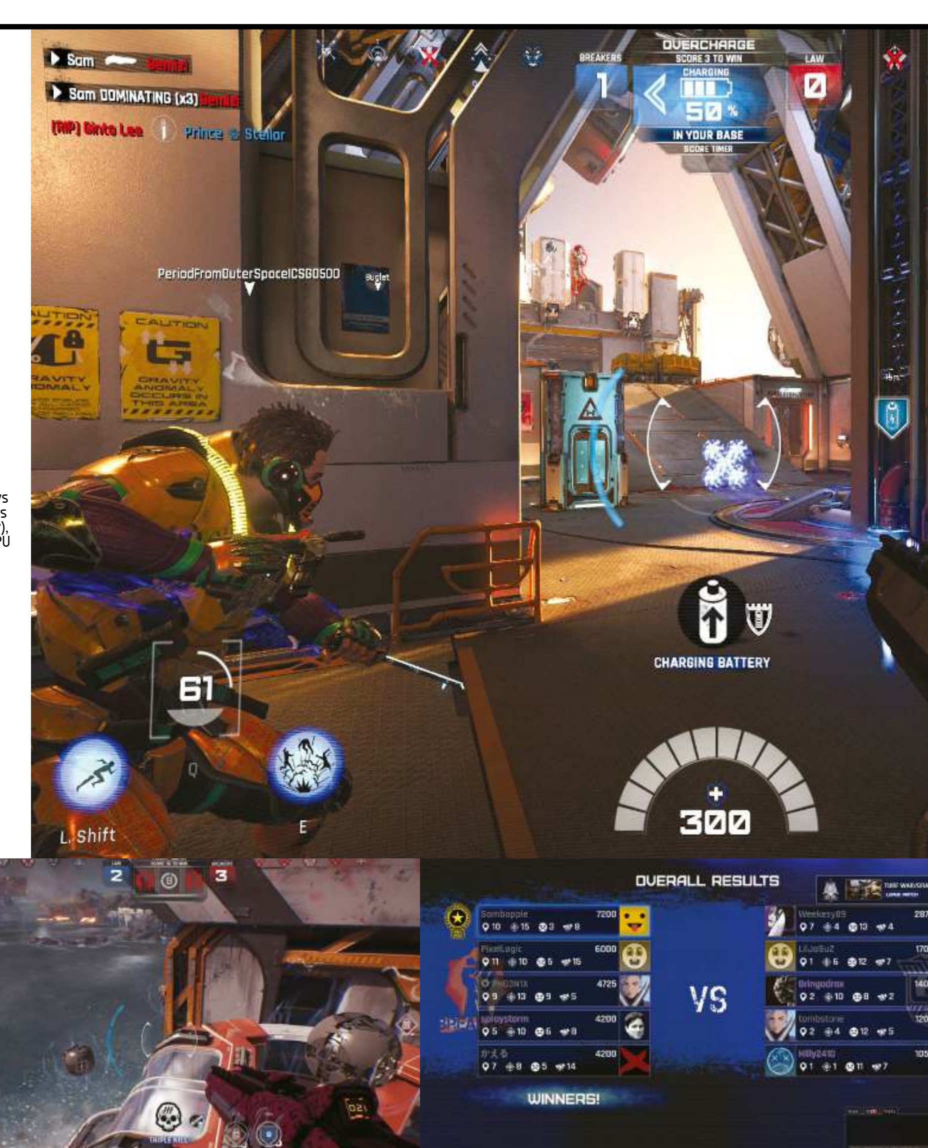


SPEC OPS: THE LINE

VERDICT 8/10
INTENSE, POWERFUL, IMPORTANT AND VERY WELL DONE

A SLICK SHOOT 'EM UP BEHIND MANY BARRIERS TO ENTRY

LawBreakers



"What makes *LawBreakers* different?" is a hard question to answer. Not because it has no unique qualities, but because they're so well hidden. A competitive shooter with heroes or classes is hardly the most novel pitch of late and *LawBreakers*, on the surface, does little to differentiate itself.

What truly separates it from the competition isn't its guns or abilities but its movement. Each class possess their own unique way to traverse the maps, filled with sections of reduced gravity, whether that be a grappling hook or jet pack. This focus on traversal is what makes *LawBreakers* play like no shooter in recent years.

Of course, it does play like shooters of old. The Unreal and Quake formula of double jumps and precision shooting is in the midst of a revival, fuelled by fans nostalgia for the late Nineties and early Noughties shooters. Whilst it hasn't got the familiar IP of those brands to fall back on for familiarity, *LawBreakers* is a much better game than those recent revivals. Partly because it has a level of polish that ought to be the envy of any shooter on the market, and partly because it's much more willing to shake up the formula. Those other games have jumping as a core part of the combat, but the sheer verticality of *LawBreakers* is dizzying. Entire fights between multiple players can take place mid-air – utilising 360 degrees of movement – as each dashes around trying to line up shots in 3D space.

The modes that line up with this novel combat make the game excel. Blitzball, a mode in which players must carry a talking bomb – voiced by *Rick And Morty*'s Justin Roiland no less – into their enemy's base, brings out the game's best. Emphasis is placed on navigation and speed, with fights rolling across the map instead of contained in a single room. Turf War manages a similar feat. In it players must fight over three points over several rounds. After the three points have been captured, an intermission follows before the points are up for grabs once more. First to 16 points wins. It pushes players to keep moving through the

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: BossKey
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, Windows 8.1, Windows 10 (64-bit versions only), Intel Core 2 Extreme CPU QX6850/AMD A8-3870k (Quad Core CPUs), 6GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 660, AMD Radeon 7870, Version 11, Broadband Internet connection, 35GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

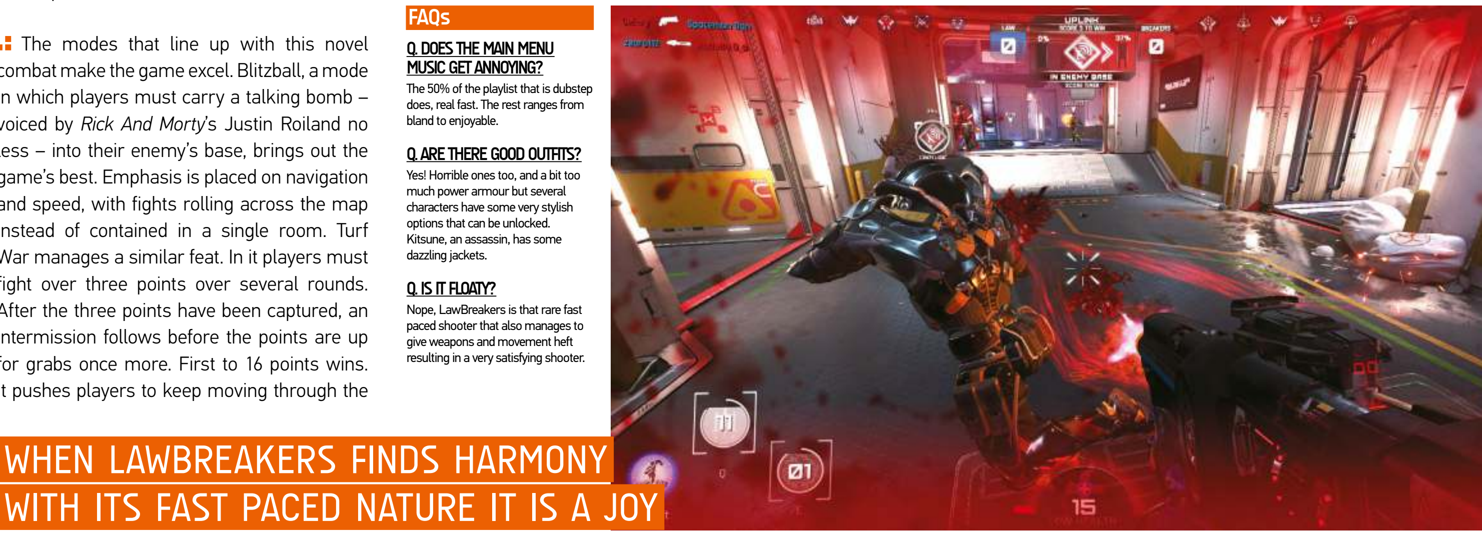


FAQs

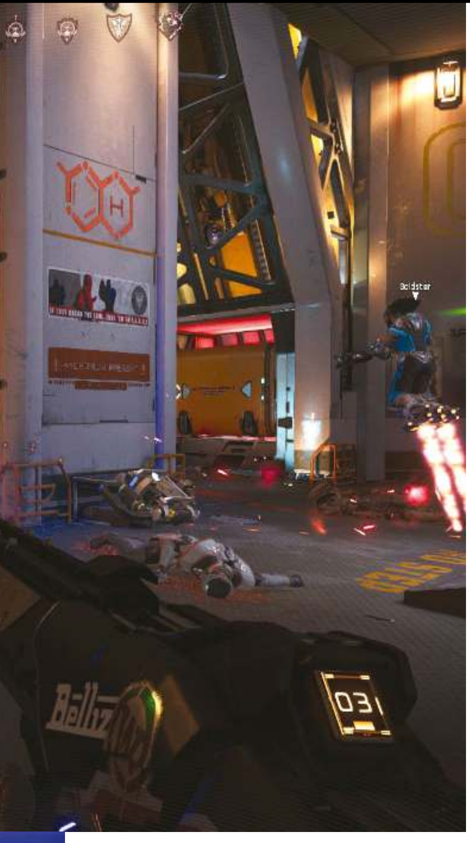
Q. DOES THE MAIN MENU MUSIC GET ANNOYING?
The 50% of the playlist that is dubstep does, real fast. The rest ranges from bland to enjoyable.

Q. ARE THERE GOOD OUTFITS?
Yes! Horrible ones too, and a bit too much power armour but several characters have some very stylish options that can be unlocked. Kitsune, an assassin, has some dazzling jackets.

Q. IS IT FLOATY?
Nope, LawBreakers is that rare fast paced shooter that also manages to give weapons and movement heft resulting in a very satisfying shooter.



WHEN LAWBREAKERS FINDS HARMONY WITH ITS FAST PACED NATURE IT IS A JOY





Below: You'll spend most of you're time fighting several dozen feet above the map instead of on it. Keeping yourself in the air is the game's real trick to master. Thankfully there's these handy floating orbs to latch onto in a pinch. **Below:** Of course there are plenty of lootboxes to unlock. You do get them frequently at least.

BETTER THAN

BATTLEBORN





WORSE THAN

OVERWATCH

maps, whipping up strategies on the fly and countering each of their opponent's moves. When *LawBreakers* finds harmony with its fast-paced nature it is a joy.

Its other modes are much less engaging. Uplink and Overcharge are variations of the same basic concept. Grab a thing and bring it back to your base and let it tick up to a point. This is *LawBreakers* at its worst, asking players to defend a square foot of land. The game is reduced to a tiring cycle of camping and futile assaults. Often the team that grabs the capture item first wins simply because trying to overcome the enemy team's combined firepower on such a small point proves intensely difficult. When capture of said item requires players to stand on the spot for several seconds before being allowed to pick it up, it feels near impossible.

"Just play the other modes then," you might say and we agree. Sadly, *LawBreakers* does not. There is only one matchmaking option, with no playlists or filters. You get what you're given – even if that means you experience the game at its worst.

None of which is helped by a painful lack of interactive tutorials. There are embedded YouTube videos that offer an overview of each class and mode, but in the end these end up being abstract descriptions of concepts that require extensive play to understand – especially given the game's depths and nuances. A more robust tutorial would have seriously helped without the hours of suffering through hopeless defeats. Although whether that would be enough to overcome the abysmal UI is another matter. The game's fast pace is not suited to a clean, small HUD where team-mates are represented by tiny text that's near invisible in the heat of a fight. *LawBreakers* might seem like a skill-based shooter, but individual play is seldom enough on its own. Teamwork is an absolute requirement and the game does almost nothing to make communication between players easy.

While the game's unique combat style takes some getting used to, it has been mastered by many of the game's player base over numerous betas. The game currently seems split between newbies and experts in a way that can make for a frustrating matchmaking experience. One minute you'll be having a tense, exciting game against players of your skill level and the next being slaughtered by those intimately familiar, who have hundreds more hours of experience than you. That these players exist is hardly an issue but the that you'll find myself pitted against them often speaks to an already dwindling player base.

For a multiplayer game that's a problem. It's hard to shake the feeling that *LawBreakers* has utterly failed to market itself. *Overwatch* knew to pitch itself on personality, to offer characters for players to latch onto that has led to massive success. There is personality buried in *LawBreakers* – stylish characters that make up a wonderfully diverse roster, with catchphrases and some dazzling outfits (garish ones too, of course). So well-hidden is it though we doubt that anyone has any idea what the characters of the game look like, let alone any of their names.

There is a great game within, that in small ways perfectly shakes up the Quake/Unreal formula. Finding it though means pushing through several barriers to entry. *LawBreakers* plays great. It just feels like a game its developers don't want anyone, except for a select few, to play. This fixation on niche has bred a singular shooter but might just kill the game before it can get started.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ANTI-GRAVITY: *LawBreakers* wants to keep players in the air, jumping and shooting. To this end most maps have large low gravity areas where thrilling acrobatics can be pulled off.

LAW OF THE LAND

LawBreakers' roster is split into two sides, one called the Law and one called the Breakers – try not to cringe. Both have the same classes, they're just embodied in different characters.

You have Enforcers, which are the most bog-standard soldier type. Harriers are more of a supporting class, flying outside fights and launching grenades in. For the snipers among you there are Gunslingers, who wield two guns and can teleport about to scout or find some nice elevation. Battle Medics are pretty self-explanatory but as is often the case of healing classes, vastly underrated. Juggernauts are the de facto tanks, able to take tonnes of damage. Titans are the heavy weapons class with a tricky to use but deadly rocket launcher. Vanguards are an assault class, able to fly like a jet plane right into enemy lines. Assassins are a nimble melee class with a grappling hook. Lastly there are the Wraiths, a light class that focuses on speed.




Pyre presents much of its narrative as a visual novel, giving you the opportunity to delve into lore and detail as you please. It's incredibly well executed, giving such depth and personality to each one of your companions.

TRY TO SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE

Pyre

There's something truly intoxicating about a new release from Supergiant Games. The studio has established an aesthetic, a ferocious creative fusion of style and sound, of rich and remarkable world building, brought to life with thoughtful, poignant characterisation. *Pyre*, much like *Bastion* and *Transistor* before it, is as unmistakable as it is alluring. But it's also a departure. You'll find commentary from Logan Cunningham and music from Darren Korb here, but it's used sparsely. *Pyre* has plenty of action in it, but isn't, crucially, an action game. In fact, it features no combat at all – at least, not in the traditional sense.

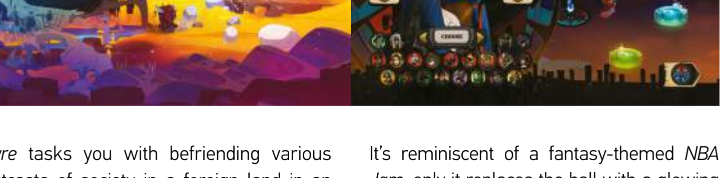
Instead, you'll find that *Pyre* is a blurring of lines between a fantasy adventure-RPG, visual novel and an arcade sports game. It shouldn't work, but it does; it's original and essential, surprisingly comprehensive and layered in its design and execution.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Supergiant Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No





Pyre tasks you with befriending various outcasts of society in a foreign land in an effort to reclaim a place in high society for yourself and your new associates.

These weird and wonderful companions make up your core team of Rite superstars, players destined to engage in ancient Rites that happen to take the form of frantic three-on-three fantasy basketball games. Winning will take you one step closer to redemption; putting you on a path to increase core statistics of each player, to earn resources to buy new equipment, and the opportunity to further leave your mark on the world and its colourful inhabitants. Losing will bring its own set of consequences to the tale, and *Pyre* accounts for, and reflects on, all of them – hundreds of branching paths helping to form your own little adventure.

The sporting aspect of the game is the most cleverly implemented mechanic here, subtly growing with complexity and difficulty. It's reminiscent of a fantasy-themed *NBA Jam*, only it replaces the ball with a glowing orb, body checks with a litany of move-types, and has far more depth and tactical opportunity to its basic play.

But the most remarkable part of *Pyre* is everything that surrounds these rituals. The world building is incredibly impressive, as is the breadth of consequence presented throughout the course of the narrative. *Pyre* is more open-ended and narratively intricate than any of Supergiant's previous works, soaked in lore and intertwining character relationships. The result is that *Pyre* does stumble at times in terms of pacing, but that's a small price to pay for such a wonderfully realised, and enjoyable experience.

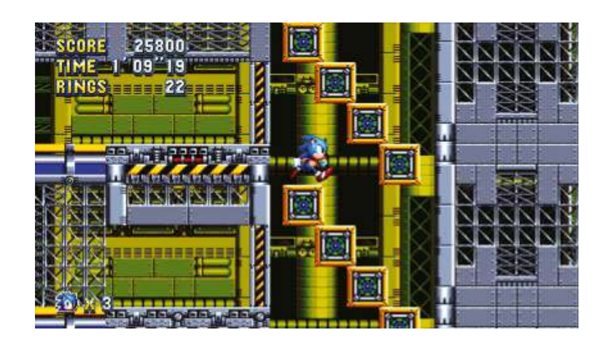
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

INCREDIBLE STYLE: The painterly style, sparse soundtrack, wonderful writing and killer sports gameplay all come together to create something that's totally original.



YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED ANYTHING QUITE LIKE THIS





Above: The setup is the standard Sonic adventure story. Robotnik/Eggman is being a bad dude, and is using his minions to stop you from ending his all conquering adventure. Oh and Tails is as annoying as you remember him – play solo.

TO BE THIS GOOD, IT TOOK AGES

Sonic Mania

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Switch, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Headcannon, PagodaWest games
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Nailing the speed and feel, this is the best Sonic game in many years that we can remember. In fact, this is the game *Sonic 4* should have been seven years ago.

Once upon a time there would be pressure on a new Sonic game. The Blue Blur's stock has fallen so far thanks to low quality and – let's face it, bad games – that *Mania*'s status as a budget game being released just before the "most wanted big releases" carries a risk that, if you're not careful, *Mania* could slip under the radar.

And that would be a massive shame, because it's only after playing *Mania* that you realise the feeling of almost every Sonic game since *Sonic & Knuckles* in 1994 has been wrong. The inertia feels perfect here, the jumps feel right, and the level design is great as well.

Starting with Green Hill Zone as you'd expect, this is a weird mish-mash of both remake and reimagining. Levels and ideas are borrowed from lots of different Sonic games, remixed in such a way that it'll make you feel old. Each area is made up of two acts, and they will often kick off by tickling your nostalgia bone, convincing you that this is that original level, before twisting and turning into something you think you recognise, but you don't – it's great.

Running from left to right is the ultimate goal, but there's more verticality than ever, and more exploration options. There are plenty of save slots, and you can choose whether you play as Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, or Sonic & Tails, and each of the characters has a unique skill (Knuckles climbs walls, Tails flies) that makes certain areas easier to get to. Speeding through areas as Sonic, rolling through walls and zooming high up into the air might show you a glimpse of something that, sure, you can probably get to somehow – but playing as Tails might make it easier, that kind of thing.

Boss battles end each act, and these are inventive and mostly enjoyable – and there are some ace surprises, too. There's a definite possibility that newcomers to Sonic will be confused, though. *Mania* plays entirely on your love of the Hedgehog that could, unfortunately, mean a lot of it leaves you cold. The plethora of nods and winks to Old Sonic are fantastic: this is a game that replicates the exact retro "look" of those beloved games, while still somehow looking modern and shiny, but it also harks back to the mechanics of those original games – and a time where heavy-handed tutorials weren't really a thing.

On top of the campaign, there is a competitive multiplayer mode (like *Sonic 2*), but ultimately this all amounts to – hold on to your trousers, because this'll shock you – a genuinely good Sonic the Hedgehog game. Yes, in 2017. That this exists at all after so many failed attempts is impressive, but the fact that it's really good is a bloody miracle.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MIXED DIFFICULTY: While most of the levels themselves pose little to no problem to get through, some of the boss battles are frustrating, while some are too easy. Special shout out to that water level bosses – thanks for the hair loss, Sega!



Above: The bonus stages present a challenge because you're taken out of the 2D side-scrolling world and put into a 3D, almost endless runner-like level. You have to chase down the Chaos Emerald by increasing your speed before your time runs out.



SONIC IS BACK, AND IT FEELS GREAT

AKA "THE INTERMINABLES"

Agents Of Mayhem

In a wide-open sandbox world, you play a variety of larger-than-life characters, battling a Cobra-style evil organisation using gadgets, guns and crass one-liners. But don't let *Agents Of Mayhem* charm you. Its cartoon aesthetic, dopey humour and constant reassurance that whatever you want to do here is a-okay – because you're the beloved videogame player – might seem like fun, but it's a smug and desperately cold piece of work. It doesn't seem to care about anyone or anything. And it's not anarchic, or anything like controversial, because it's also really, deeply corporate – one of the characters walks around with Deep Silver's logo printed on his t-shirt, for crying out loud.

Between riffing on *GI Joe* and *Power Rangers*, and making sweary jokes, *Agents Of Mayhem* is tonally all over the place and as a result is neither harmlessly entertaining nor enjoyably obscene. If you want something colourful and really well-designed, that you can maybe play with your kids, *Agents Of Mayhem* is too coarse. If you like videogame violence and mature or shock humour, it's far too predictable and safe. *Agents Of Mayhem* feels like a particularly boring round of *Overwatch*, being narrated by a lame, offensive-to-order internet comedian. Especially today, when we expect at least a modicum of quality in videogame writing – and are probably also bored with routine sandbox titles – it's hard to ascertain who *Agents Of Mayhem* is for.

Two moments stand out. In-between missions, one of *Agent Of Mayhem*'s apparently amusing characters will appear on-screen to make some wisecrack. Typically these are ignorable, if entirely unfunny, but when Rama, whose back story details her family dying of disease in Mumbai, says "if your family is all dead like mine, going on holiday is no fun!" *Agents Of Mayhem* practically strides over the line, from gleeful poor taste to outright nastiness. We're no prudes. We appreciate pushing boundaries. But it's as if *Agents Of Mayhem* will say anything

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Volition
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE





WORSE THAN

MAFIA III

Above: Somewhere between *Power Rangers* and *The Expendables*, *Agents Of Mayhem*'s tone gets lost. It's not innocent enough to be playful. It's not coarse or brave enough to be controversial. The jokes feel lazy.

Below: *Agents Of Mayhem*'s version of Seoul, South Korea might not be very accurate but it's enjoyable to run around and singularly encapsulates the game's occasionally appealing, cartoonish visuals.

WHEN IT SHUTS UP, AGENTS OF MAYHEM IS PRECISELY THE LAIDBACK, PLAYFUL SHOOTER IT SEEMINGLY WANTS TO BE



FAQs

Q. IS IT CONNECTED?
Various characters and events from Volition's other knockabout sandbox series, *Saints Row*, are referenced in *Agents Of Mayhem* but it's largely its own game.

Q. IS IT FAMILY-FRIENDLY?
Despite its Saturday-morning-cartoon aesthetic, *Agents Of Mayhem* is filled with bad language and "adult" themes.

Q. IS IT LONG?
Like any self-respecting sandbox game these days, *Agents Of Mayhem* is full of missions, side-missions and other challenges. Expect it to last tens of hours.

Below: Considering their often terrible dialogue, all the characters are well-acted. Indian archer and stealth operative Rama certainly deserves a special mention.



to get a cheap, not-sure-how-else-to-react kind of laugh. Real people's suffering, not to mention the dignity and humanity of its own, fictional characters are both thrown under the wheels here for the sake of some tawdry non-gag. When the makers of *Agents Of Mayhem* expect you to laugh along with this stuff, it's hard not to feel vaguely insulted, like they think very little of your intelligence or morals – like they think they can get this past you.

During another mission, you shoot it out with bad guys at a rooftop dance party. Civilians scream, run, and inevitably get caught in the crossfire. If you want, you can stand there machine-gunning them en masse. And the game says nothing. In fact, you get a phone call, from one of the guys at Mayhem HQ, telling you how big, public battles like this are a great way to increase your "online brand." You're led to believe these characters are jocular, anarchic and fighting on the side of good, but they're murdering unarmed people and then boasting about their amount of Twitter followers – they just seem horrible. Forgetting even good taste, this is bad writing.

In one moment, the Agents are presented as knockabout, buddy-cop characters; in the next, they're raging psychopaths, and the rest of the game either ignores or tries to cover it up with even more stupid humour. In a game premised almost entirely on player interaction, which insists how you play and what you do are the most important, defining things, you shouldn't be expected to separate your mucking about from the script as written: if the makers of *Agents Of Mayhem* really want players to be a central, creative voice, every murder they commit has to be accepted as canon. And so the eponymous agents – because they act either narcissistic or indifferent – are awful, and not in any way that's intentional, clever or interrogative – just careless.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WRITING: *Agents Of Mayhem* handles the basics, like driving and shooting, just fine. But its supposedly hilarious characters are just unbearable. The game could use a rewrite, or some kind of "silent cut."

It's a shame, because behind *Agent Of Mayhem*'s ugly façade – maybe if you turn the sound right down – is a fairly enjoyable game. Switching between characters on-the-go lends the action a lot of pace. Its adaptation of Seoul, South Korea, is colourful and perfectly scaled, so you can easily free-run and climb around it. It's a good game to pick up and play for an hour or so, or have sitting on your console's home menu so you can nibble on it while you decide what you actually want to play. When it shuts up, *Agents Of Mayhem* is precisely the laidback, playful shooter it seemingly wants to be.

But play *Agents Of Mayhem* for too long at a time and the missions, side-quests and other ambient challenges begin to repeat themselves. You capture a radio tower. You collect X item and bring it to Y location. You open a menu and sit and upgrade all your characters. Considering its name, *Agents Of Mayhem* feels incredibly well-mannered. Most of what you do, you've done in dozens of sandbox games before, especially *Saints Row*.

Directly pitched as a game about causing chaos, *Agents Of Mayhem* – since it often plays on open-world conventions – feels doubly derivative. Like if you're listening to a favourite punk album, that's also been published by Warner or Universal, it's hard to forget all the "mayhem" has been ultimately approved by people in suits. It feels disingenuous, hypocritical – and the guy walking around Mayhem headquarters in corporate branding certainly doesn't help. If *Agents Of Mayhem* stemmed from a smaller, outsider game-maker, it might be taken as a kind of punching up, or fiery contrarianism. As it stands, the game is a weak attempt to get your money, by patronising and giving you exactly what you expect.

VERDICT 4/10
AN UGLY GAME THAT'S AFFECTING ALL ITS ATTITUDE

BLANDBOX

Upgrades, radio towers, recapturing areas of the map – sandbox games nowadays seem to all roughly fit the same model. There is a lot of sheer size but often very little by way of variety. As opposed to doing "whatever you like," the way these games promise, you end up doing the same or similar things over and over. To lay all this at the feet of *Agent Of Mayhem*, to say its dullness is unprecedented, would be unfair. But it certainly adheres to the most boring conventions of an increasingly boring genre. 2016's *Mafia III*, and to lesser extents *Nier: Automata* and *Yakuza 0*, demonstrated how open-world games can be done differently. We'd like to see more of those, and fewer, or at least drastically reworked, games like this.



PROBLEMS OF SUCCESS BREEDING EXPECTATION

Matterfall

Housemarque is the Quentin Tarantino of the videogame world; a studio whose output almost exclusively takes the form of remixes and inter-splicing of cult classics. While it would be unfair and incorrect to say that the Finnish studio's work is one of plagiarism, it would be accurate to say its output is loaded with references to ideas no longer considered fashionable.

Nex Machina borrowed from *Smash TV* and *Robotron*, whilst *Resogun* proudly wore its *Defender* influence on its sleeve. It says much about Housemarque's ability that it has managed to turn design ideas considered passé into such celebrated gems of the modern videogame landscape. *Matterfall* takes its beats from both *Gunstar Heroes* and *Metal Slug*, side-scrolling shooters that live and die by the degree to which they're able to tempt you to indulge in creating – and avoiding – a ceaseless wave of bullets.

Past success creates lofty expectations for the future and, unfortunately, *Matterfall* doesn't quite live up to them. What's offered here is not at all bad, but it does not harbour the same degree of elite balance, pacing and sense of achievement as provided by Housemarque's back catalogue.

Level design fails to deliver the same slick interplay between enemy movement and personal tactical choice as *Nex Machina*, while the weapon design and character

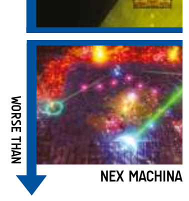
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Housemarque
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

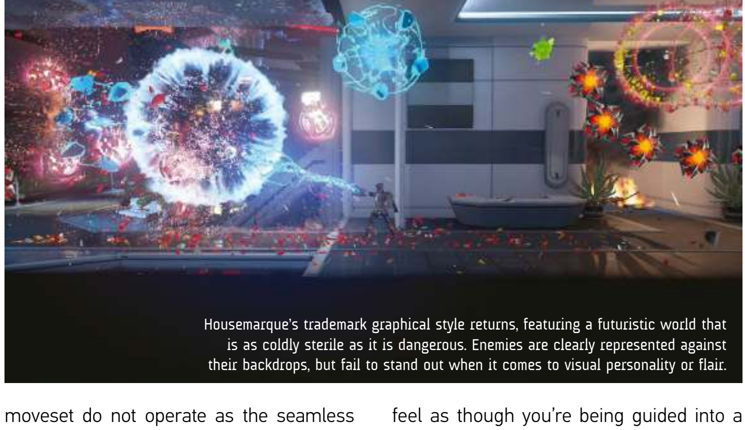
OUTLAND





NEX MACHINA

WORSE THAN



Housemarque's trademark graphical style returns, featuring a futuristic world that is as coldly sterile as it is dangerous. Enemies are clearly represented against their backdrops, but fail to stand out when it comes to visual personality or flair.

moveset do not operate as the seamless whole they are in *Resogun*. *Matterfall* is a different game to these two examples, of course, but it relies on many of the same elements to succeed and it's these essentials that are comparatively lacking.

A large part of the failing comes from a reliance on ramping up the quantity of enemy numbers and challenging you with trickier map layouts, as opposed to diversifying the type of opposition and environments. The result is that you're able to quite quickly predict what's coming next, meaning you're rarely looking forward to the next zone as an opportunity to learn something new, or as a reason to force yourself to improve your understanding of the available interactions.

Instead, you find yourself concentrating more on staying alive over how to attain a high score through being an active participant. Essentially, you often feel as though you're being guided into a more conservative style of play than we're used to from Housemarque and thus the aspirational tones of its previous games feels somewhat muted.

To be too hard on *Matterfall* is difficult, though. Even mentioning a 'failing' is a little harsh in the grand scheme of things, with the design here trumping most of what is offered by developers other than Housemarque. To be certain, this is not an objectively bad game – it's just an inferior proposition to the other subjects to have come from the studio responsible for it.

If you've never played a Housemarque game before then you'll likely love what's here, but if you're coming to *Matterfall* off the back of *Resogun* and/or *Nex Machina* then prepare for an anti-climax.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DIVERSIFICATION: Rather than rely on throwing more and more enemies at you, *Matterfall*'s overall pacing would be enhanced by more of a focus on variety over quantity.

VERDICT 6/10

GOOD, BUT NOWHERE NEAR HOUSEMARQUE'S BEST WORK



Above: While there are certainly high moments that are engaging and provide variable pacing, much of *Matterfall* can feel repetitive in comparison to the classics available from Housemarque's back catalogue. A greater variety of enemy type would have helped enormously in creating a stronger sense of intrigue than is apparent here.





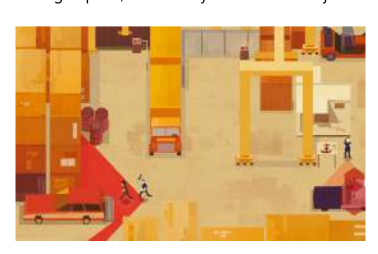
The cops might look like they've had one too many doughnuts, but they'll catch you surprisingly fast unless you find somewhere to hide.

CLEANING UP SOMEONE ELSE'S DIRTY WORK

Serial Cleaner

Everyone's seen bodies riddled with more holes than Swiss cheese in gangster movies, or heard of evidence mysteriously disappearing in thrillers. *Serial Cleaner* takes you behind the scenes by putting you in the blood-stained shoes of the man who makes all those inconvenient details disappear. Stealthing your way through maps, you've got to collect bodies, evidence, and trophies on behalf of the Mafia – all while avoiding the glare of patrolling cops.

Serial Cleaner oozes cool. The Seventies' funk soundtrack pumps through your ears as you scuttle through the stylishly-angular maps. Jumping into oil drums and biting your lip as you sprint to avoid the cone-shaped eyelines of the strutting cops, the bangin' beats make you feel like you're on a heist. Hold down L2 to activate your 'cleaner sight' and see the location of each body, bit of evidence, hiding spots, and any movable objects.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Curve Digital
DEVELOPER: iFun4All S.A
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Thankfully this means checking your surroundings is a breeze and avoids de-escalating the thrillingly cinematic tension.

Irritatingly, if you're caught by a policeman you get booted back right to the beginning of the level. It feels unfair, as on the harder levels getting to bodies on the other side of the map is a tricky feat to pull off, and you'd much rather it just kicked you to a checkpoint after your last body drop. It's a cheap way to make the levels last longer, and quickly gets frustrating.

However, the speed with which you zip around the map is perfectly balanced. Each action, whether it's hauling a body over your shoulder, jumping into a hiding spot, or sucking up blood with a vacuum cleaner (no joke) is swift. Making you feel every inch the crafty professional, you can inch bodies closer to the drop point and simply dump 'em and hide when cops turn up. Eventually it becomes second nature to look for blind spots, with patience and planning being rewarded. Moustache-twirling levels of deviousness are reached in later levels where you can funnel cops in different directions by moving crates around, although it does take a bit of practise to use this to its full potential.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DREAM WARDROBE: Get some new threads by finding hidden Eleganza Magazines scattered around.
MOVIE AFICIONADO: Discovering film reels in story missions will unlock movie-inspired contracts.

Returning home in between missions gives you breathing space. Your mum is cooking a meal or watching boxing, and the newspapers and radio scream out the latest news. Spoiler: all the headlines are your doing. They change after every mission to reflect what you've been up to, making it clear that your actions have consequences. Plus there's the sense that events are reaching a crescendo. *Serial Cleaner* is simple stealthing with shades on, and it does it well. Although it doesn't throw advanced mechanics your way, it's great to dip in and out of and will have you growing sideburns before it's over.



TIGHT STEALTHING AND FUNKY STYLE. NOT TO BE MISSED

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Size Five Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.4GHz, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800 equivalent or higher, 1GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
DINO DINI'S KICK OFF REVIVAL

WORSE THAN
FIFA 17

DO A GOAL AND MAKE YOUR MUM PROUD

Behold The Kickmen



Parody isn't easy. Making something riff off real life and ensuring it's genuinely humorous takes skill and careful planning, and can easily be a groan-inducing, cringeworthy nightmare. It's a fine line.

For us, *Behold The Kickmen* skirts just on the right side of that line, raising a smile and even, on occasion, coaxing a guffaw from our usually hardened journalistic faces. We love football, but it's fair to say that we can see just what a ridiculous sport it really is, and *Behold The Kickmen* does a great job of sending it up. An absurd story mode is the highlight, as your star player faces off against some smarmy nincompoop from Brazil United, which wins the World Cup every year. Yes, this is a game made by someone who knows little about football and, if anything, actively dislikes it. If for you a team winning is life or death the tone might grate, but for us the well-aimed writing really hits the mark.

Unfortunately, as soon as the game heads for the circular pitch, things go downhill. Your tiny team have skills like dodges and slide tackles that let you claim the ball and start running with a well-timed press on the suggested controller, but that doesn't save the gameplay. Passing is haphazard, your players slow down drastically when they have the ball, and goals are usually scored because the AI keeper is doing something stupid rather than thanks to a skilfully-controlled shot. It's functional, and it never becomes truly tedious, but there were times when we were hoping for the actual football to end so we could get back to the funnier stuff.

Whether or not you enjoy *Behold The Kickmen* will likely come down to whether you think the on-screen message when you score – "Congratulations! You've done a goal!" – is charmingly silly or just painful. We think that the humour works brilliantly for the most part; it's such a shame that we can't say the same for the gameplay.



Above: The offside rule is even more confusing than real football. So is everything else about this screenshot.

VERDICT 5/10
IF YOU DON'T MIND POOR GAMEPLAY, THIS WILL ENTERTAIN

WHATEVER KILLS YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER

Sundered

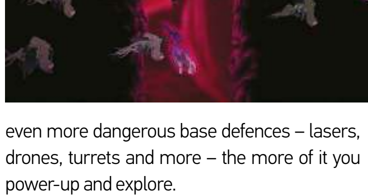
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Thunder Lotus Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 1.8 GHz processor, 4 GB RAM, DirectX 10-compatible graphics card with at least 256MB of video memory, DirectX version 10, 3 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



AS GOOD AS
AXIOM VERGE

WORSE THAN
ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST



The art and animation style of *Sundered* are really outstanding and add to the ethereal feel of the whole game. It manages to be both very modern in approach and yet have an air of *Another World* or *Prince Of Persia* to it at the same time.

Narratively *Sundered* plays merrily in that grey area of uncertainty as to whether you're the hero or villain of this particular tale. You certainly seem to be the victim of a hyped-up security system, but perhaps you're deserving of this overly aggressive attention. What exactly are you hoping to achieve here anyway and why exactly do you keep coming back every time you die?

You see, death is an integral part of success in *Sundered* as it's the most logical reason for you to return to the first chamber of this labyrinthine facility to spend all of the shards you've collected slicing up creatures and machines, smashing containers and defeating gigantic bosses. You could warp there of your own accord, but why would you when there's another portion of undiscovered world map just in sight? And you will die soon because *Sundered* is unrelenting. It throws swarms of enemies at you with seeming glee, each type getting stronger and more particular as you yourself level up while also activating even more dangerous base defences – lasers, drones, turrets and more – the more of it you power-up and explore.

It can all be a bit much, frankly, but if you're looking for a challenge and don't mind that the game's almost *Devil May Cry*-ish combat system is simplified to a single button input – removing much sense of nuance in your combat options, although not completely – then *Sundered* will be right up your street. It's very much in the *Hotline Miami* school of grinding indie experiences, albeit as an adventure platformer.

One of the fun twists on the traditional Metroid-style structure that *Sundered* otherwise sticks to quite rigidly is that whole sections of the game map actually change every time you die. Key boss locations and areas of interest remain constant in design and position, but large swathes of corridors or larger rooms will be completely different on your next pass, which actually helps keep you on your toes rather nicely.

Combined with the wonderful hand-drawn animation style, *Sundered* brings a lot of interesting ideas to the table, just as long as you can stand the grind.



VERDICT 7/10
GORGEOUS, BUT SOMETIMES LABORIOUS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Game Grumps
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 2.2GHz processor, 4GB RAM, Direct X compatible card, 4GB available disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

YOU GIVE LOVE A DAD NAME

Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator

***Dream Daddy* makes you feel good.** It's a simple and pure thing. You may think that you're about to get down and dirty with some dads, but what you find is a heartwarming tale of love, whether that's for your daughter about to go off to university or for the flawed, lonely men that live in your dad-filled cul-de-sac.

The game is relatively short – even if you go on the maximum number of dad-dates and you're a slow reader (and this well-written visual novel gives you a lot of reading to do) you'll still find yourself at around eight hours of play time. But that eight hours is filled with sweetness and light, the kind of antidote you may be craving after a decade of shooting faceless goons in a brick-brown city. It can feel disappointing to "fail" certain dialogue choices, with clouds of disapproval emanating from your dad of choice, you may even find yourself on multiple playthroughs, desperate to win the respect of these fictional dads.

The dialogue itself – the main bulk of the game, other than the rather lovely art – is well-written and as full of puns as you might hope a dad-themed game would be. On top of that, it feels real and honest, from your dad's three choices when halfway through a run ("UGHH", "UGHHHHHH", and "UGHHHHHHHHHHHH") to the lumpy, badly-made apology cake you make for your slightly-angsty teenage daughter.

More than anything, though, *Dream Daddy* continues to pave the way for games that prize emotional openness, diversity and representation alongside good storytelling and great visuals. Games are about more than just entertainment; they are a reflection of us as a society, and we should all want to be a part of the society that *Dream Daddy* reflects.

BETTER THAN: VA-11 HALL-A

WORSE THAN: STEINS;GATE





VERDICT 7/10
DREAM DADDY IS A BREATH OF FRESH AIR





Above: The *Dream Daddy* character creator is incredibly varied, with options to create a purple-haired nose-piercing dad, a trans dad, and even (sigh) Goku if you really want to. But do you really want to be that person?

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android, 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Level-5
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

PROFESSOR LAYTON'S DAUGHTER'S RUNNING THINGS NOW

Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle And The Millionaire's Conspiracy

Katrielle Layton misses her father, and so do we. Professor Layton has gone missing – though why this is remains a mystery. Instead, we have his daughter, Katrielle, who has very little of her father's wit and intelligence, and instead comes across as a bumbling amateur detective who stumbles on answers thanks to her more capable assistants rather than solving crimes like the Professor did.

The game is beautiful, though, with painterly backgrounds and fantastic animated cutscenes with almost Ghibli-esque detail. The heavily fictionalised London setting is far too colourful and clean to represent the realities of the Big Smoke, but it's a London we'd much rather see.

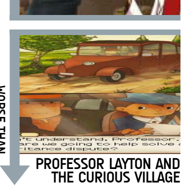
As always with Level-5, the writing and the localisation are undeniably brilliant and deserve much credit, but the plots and the puzzles – which the Layton games are known for, obviously – fall short. Most of the puzzles are more like riddles or trick questions, leaving the Layton lover feeling short-changed as they try to come up with a clever answer only to be corrected by the correct, pedantic one. The plots, meanwhile, centre around either obvious misunderstandings. or ludicrous conclusions, as with the one case where someone attempts to replace a missing object with a version of it made in cake.

There are some enjoyable minigames too, although one of them, Ideal Meal, relies on collecting items rather than logic. There are also puzzles you will never find unless you replay old cases; Layton games usually have a way of finding "missed" puzzles, and it's a shame this one doesn't. All in all, this game feels like a bunch of disparate parts mixed together. All the ingredients are there, but the recipe's not quite right.

BETTER THAN: LAYTON BROTHERS: MYSTERY ROOM



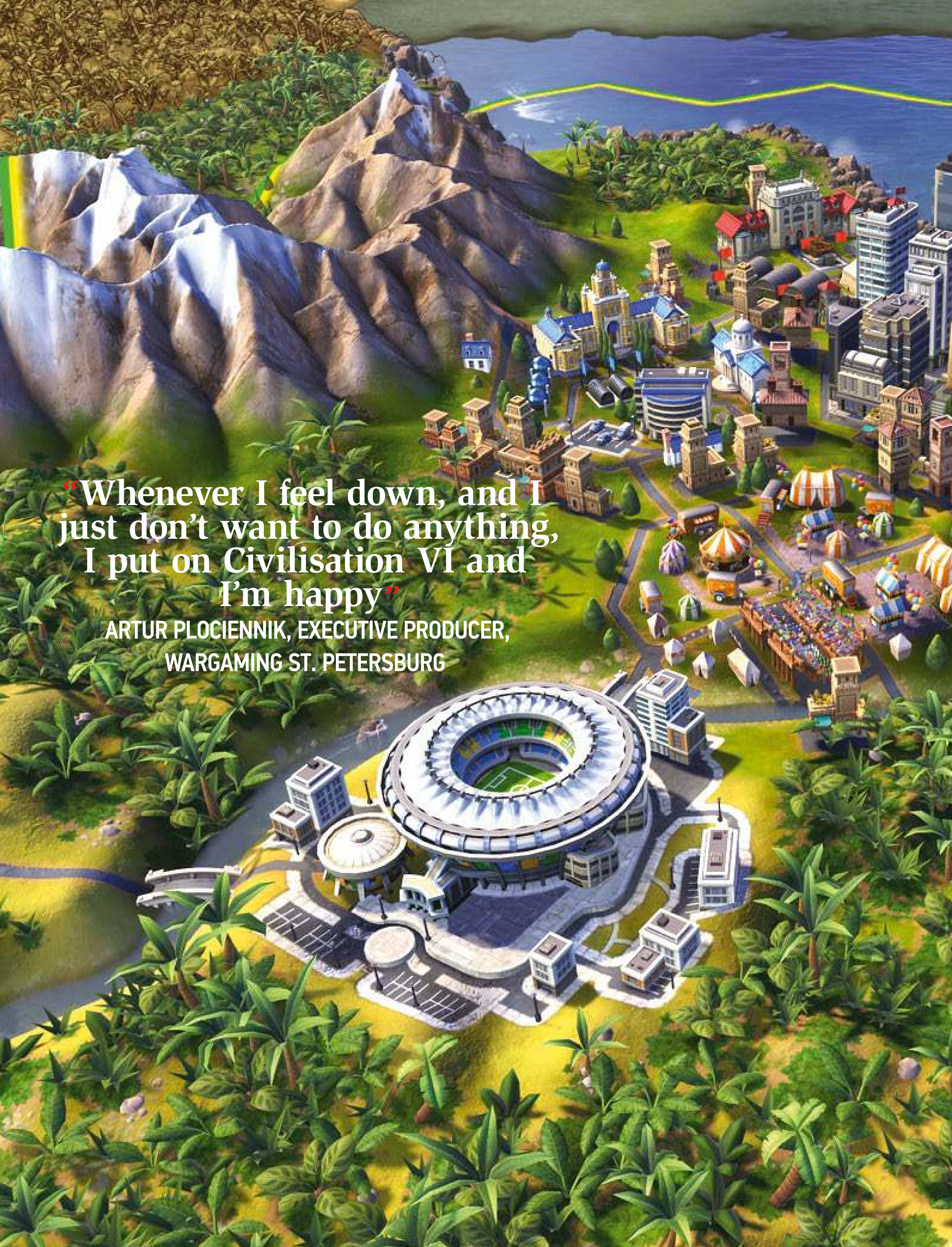
WORSE THAN: PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE



VERDICT 6/10
BEAUTIFUL, JOKE-FILLED, BUT ULTIMATELY A LITTLE EMPTY



Above: One of the assistants is a talking dog who just can't get enough of dog puns, so be prepared for an onslaught of characters that are "barking mad" and having a "bone to pick" with someone who's an absolute "dog's dinner."



"Whenever I feel down, and I just don't want to do anything, I put on Civilisation VI and I'm happy"

ARTUR PLOCIENNIK, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, WARGAMING ST. PETERSBURG



WHY I ♥... CIVILIZATION VI

ARTUR PLOCIENNIK,
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, WARGAMING
ST. PETERSBURG

“Oh god, there are so many games that I love… why does this have to be so hard? It’s actually a very interesting question to ask, especially to developers, because everybody in this industry is only here because they are passionate about it.

But you know, I absolutely love Civilization. Whenever I feel down, and I just don’t want to do anything, I put on Civilization VI, *listen to Sean Bean’s narration and suddenly I’m happy. That’s the game.*

The city-states management in Civ VI *is really cool; the Civics tree has been reworked really well over what it was like in* Civ V. *The studio also changed some stuff that I’m very happy about for multiplayer and co-operative play; when you play in teams with your friends, previously you would have shared research trees but it was kind of annoying because of how skilled the gameplay is. But in* Civilization VI *you don’t have to deal with that anymore, and it’s a better and more streamlined experience because of it. The game is so much improved from* Civ V *and I just love it.”*

RETRO

NO.191



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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... NINTENDO 64

With rumours of an N64 Mini circulating we felt it was the perfect time to revisit Nintendo's answer to Sony's PlayStation. How many of the following gems did you experience?

FOR SOME, NINTENDO'S 64-bit console is where things started to go wrong for the Kyoto-based publisher. Nintendo's bullish decision to stick with cartridges over the ever-popular CD-ROM saw it lose key 16-bit supporters such as Squaresoft and Enix, while its lack of diversity within certain key genres such as the RPG and fighting markets also hurt its reputation. It mattered not though, for while the N64's library was small compared to its rivals, the PlayStation and Saturn, it arguably had some of the most important games of the generation on it, and better yet, they were all exclusives. Nintendo may not have had the support it had enjoyed during the 8- and 16-bit days, but its in-house developers were arguably at their most creative, producing games that would shape their respective genres for years to come. That's one impressive legacy.







SUPER MARIO 64 1996

NINTENDO EAD

Play *Super Mario 64* today and you're instantly reminded that it's still a stunning piece of game design. Sure, it looks a little rough around the edges and the camera can give you the odd issue, but the creativity to be found in both its gameplay design and imaginatively created worlds really does impress. Like *Super Mario World* before it, it pushed the platformer genre forward, but this time the introduction of 3D allowed for even more exciting gameplay mechanics. Your control of Mario is intrinsically linked to the N64's three-pronged controller allowing the versatile plumber to pull off a staggering variety of moves. And then, of course, there's the sandbox design of each world, allowing you to tackle the game's challenges however you choose. The beauty of *Super Mario 64* is that you never know what's around the corner; one minute you're racing a penguin down a slippery slope, the next you're swinging Bowser by the tail, meaning it always feels fresh and exciting. The fact that it's still able to evoke those feeling two decades on is nothing short of staggering.





PILOTWINGS 64 1996

PARADIGM ENTERTAINMENT

Nintendo's collaboration with Paradigm Entertainment set a benchmark for what was possible on the N64 in the same way that the original game highlighted the power of the SNES. Each of the different events: Hang Gliding, Rocket Belt and Gyrocopter are easy to play, but difficult to master, while the entertaining bonus rounds range from the delightful to the absurd. And when you're done with *Pilotwings*' tough challenges simply take to the air as Birdman, a mode that is as relaxing as it is impressive to look at.





WAVE RACE 64 1996

NINTENDO EAD

21 years on and we're still in awe of just how realistic *Wave Race 64*'s water is. It feels alive in a way that few other games seem to achieve, meaning that in addition to racing against the challenging AI opponents you're also fighting against the very elements as well. Sadly, *Wave Race Blue Storm* would be the franchise's last game.



MARIO KART 64 1996

NINTENDO EAD

New additions to the series include an excellent four-player mode and far more interesting track design thanks to the introduction of proper 3D graphics. Many of the tracks remain brilliant to race on, while Battle Mode becomes even more essential with the addition of two more players. The annoying purple shell can do one though, since it marks the point where the series became more of a party game.





BLAST CORPS 1997

RARE

Rare was one of the most creative developers on Nintendo's 64-bit console and *Blast Corps* is all the proof you need of that fact. You use a variety of different demolition vehicles to level everything in the surrounding area so you can guide a nuclear missile carrier to safety. Each vehicle – and the later robot mechs you gain access to – greatly vary the dynamics of play meaning there's a surprising amount of strategy to go alongside all the wanton destruction.

LYLAT WARS 1997

NINTENDO EAD

■ Nintendo's supercharged sequel remains the best game in the franchise, effortlessly channelling the spirit of *Star Wars* and countless other sci-fi flicks. The first N64 game to include rumble support remains an incredibly satisfying blaster thanks to its excellent level design, tight controls and endearing roster of heroes. The medal system the game employs ensures plenty of replay value, while the epic boss encounters have never been beaten since.







MISCHIEF MAKERS 1997

TREASURE

■ While its peers were forging ahead with 3D, Treasure decided to stick with what it knew best and create a 2D extravaganza. While the new catching mechanic *Mischief Makers* uses can be tricky to get to grips with, perseverance rewards you with one of the system's most interesting and unique games.

MYSTICAL NINJA STARRING GOEMON 1997

KONAMI

■ While it abandoned the two-player mode that had made *The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja* so popular, Konami's first 3D outing for its purple-haired ninja lost none of the humour or wackiness of the earlier games. An equally solid sequel called *Goemon's Great Adventure* appeared the following year with a restored multiplayer mode.



GOLDENEYE 007 1997

RARE

■ Martin Hollis and his team created a multi-layered shooter with incredible level design and cutting-edge 3D that established a template that all future console FPS games would imitate. It's astonishing to think the fabled multiplayer was knocked up at the last minute by Steve Ellis.





DIDDY KONG RACING 1997

RARE

■ Many gamers prefer this to *Mario Kart 64* and it's not hard to understand why. It retains the same four-player racing as its predecessor but also allows the use of planes and hovercrafts, which greatly vary the gameplay. The adventure mode is a brilliant touch too, since it offers far more structure than *Mario Kart 64* and allows you to race against a gigantic pig.





FIGHTER'S DESTINY 1998

GENKI

■ The N64 is poorly served when it comes to standard one-on-one brawlers, and it's arguably one of the weakest genres on the system. On the other hand it does has some highly unusual offerings, including this brilliant gem from Genki, which utilises a highly involving points system that rewards you for defeating your opponent with trickier to pull-off moves. Some of the characters are utterly bizarre and it's not the prettiest-looking game, but the depth of its mechanics is to be applauded. An equally enjoyable sequel, *Fighter's Destiny 2*, appeared in 2000.



1080 SNOWBOARDING 1998

NINTENDO EAD

■ Nintendo's snowboarding game harks back to a time when Nintendo games were as challenging as they were fun to play. *1080 Snowboarding* is certainly not an easy game to master, but it's highly satisfying when you finally pull off a perfect run and leave your friends feeling piste.

INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTAR SOCCER '98 1998

KONAMI



■ Konami's ISS series began life on the SNES, but it arguably came of age on the N64. It's far more arcade-like than other examples of the genre, but that's to its advantage as games are fast-paced with fluid player movement and plenty of chances to score goals. It lacks the official licences that made the EA games of the time so desirable, but when it comes to pure gameplay, the '98 iteration of Konami's football series is pretty much unbeatable. The penalty kick mode is great fun, too.



WETRIX 1998

ZED TWO



■ This imaginative puzzle game has the player trying to score as many points as possible by using pieces to manipulate lakes and the water found within them. Letting water spill off the landscape fills your Drain meter, which causes the game to end, so you need to use various items to stop that from happening. It takes a little while to understand how the mechanics work, but once it clicks it becomes one of the system's most compelling puzzlers.



BANJO-KAZOOIE 1998

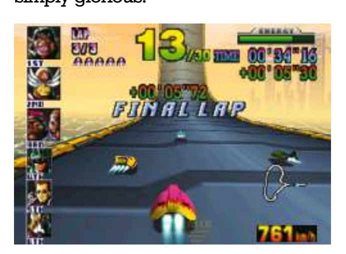
RARE

■ The second best platformer on the N64 remains a delight to play. The interplay between Banjo and Kazooie is every bit as entertaining as their abilities are to use, while the level design of each world feels alive and organic. Oh, and it perfectly balances the collecting that would bloat many later Rare games.

F-ZERO X 1998

NINTENDO EAD

■ The N64's best racer builds on everything that made the original *F-Zero* great, but amplifies it massively. The track design is exemplary, really testing your skills on the later cups, while the sheer number of opponents makes every race a white-knuckle thrill ride. Oh, and the four-player race mode is simply glorious.



PILOTING PILOTWINGS 64

Dave Gatchel looks back at the N64 launch game

Why did Nintendo approach you to work on *Pilotwings*?

At the time, it was clear that Nintendo's interest in us was due to our experience in 3D graphics. We had very little experience developing games and no experience developing console games. Nintendo approached us knowing that we already understood most of the issues related to the 3D technology, and that they would need to help us understand the issues surrounding game design. Also, several of us had previous experience working with CGI during the integration of new hardware, which might have been perceived as an advantage.

Did you work alongside Nintendo?

Prior to *Pilotwings 64* our strength had been high-end 3D graphics, developing tools and applications for the simulation and training industry. As a result, we worked with the design staff from Nintendo. Our initial contact was Mr Takeda, who at the time managed Nintendo's R&D3 group and was in charge of the overall N64 development. On the design side, the lead designer was Makoto Wada, who was a member of Miyamoto's design group. During the production, we learned a great deal from working with Nintendo, not just about game design specifically, but also about producing games in general. The schedule was intense and the stakes were quite high for us, but overall it was a lot of fun.

What challenges did you face?

Nintendo was leading the design effort; however, [it was] willing to consider suggestions from the team. In some respects, since the schedule was so tight, it really became necessary for the design and production team to work collaboratively. What sticks out for me was the schedule; our goal was to be a launch title, and to achieve that it took an incredible effort from the entire team, really the entire company. During the last four to five months, it wasn't unusual for the majority of the team to work through most of the night. Everyone really extended themselves to the limit. Initially everything related to the industry was so new to us I honestly don't think we felt a great deal of pressure. Later, once it became clear that Nintendo was counting on us to deliver a launch title and it would only be *Mario 64* and *Pilotwings 64* at launch, there was some pressure.

Did you enjoy your time?

Working on *Pilotwings 64* was truly a great experience. Nintendo was one of the most professional and supportive organisations that I've had the pleasure of dealing with. [It] introduced us to game development, and [was] a great mentor on what it takes to produce great products and to survive in this industry.





RAKUGA KIDS 1998

KONAMI

■ Konami's utterly wacky fighter proved the company had lost none of its creativity from the 16-bit period. The character roster may be small, but being made from crayon drawings mean they have a fantastical range of wacky special moves that are as memorable as Konami's character designs.

BODY HARVEST 1998

DMA DESIGN

■ It hasn't aged gracefully, but *Body Harvest* is still worth diving back into. Painfully delayed (it was intended as a launch game) it has a fully interactive sandbox world with a large amount of vehicles you can use as you face off against a deadly alien onslaught. True, you'll battle the camera as much as the aliens, but it's still worth experiencing.





SPACE STATION SILICON VALLEY 1998

DMA DESIGN

■ This incredibly inventive game is one of the N64's most underappreciated gems. You have to navigate the game world's four environments and solve puzzles by using your tiny robot to take over a variety of robotic animals, all with their own unique abilities. It was eventually ported to the PlayStation and Game Boy Color.

GLOVER 1998

INTERACTIVE STUDIOS



■ Inspired by the Oliver twins watching Crazy Golf, *Glover* has you using a disembodied glove to guide a ball through a variety of different stages. Glover's skill set enables him to dribble, bounce and throw his ball and even run across it or use it as a trampoline. The ball itself can also be changed into a variety of forms, allowing you to better solve the many puzzles that crop up throughout *Glover*'s six worlds.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME 1998

NINTENDO EAD

■ Like *Super Mario 64* before it, *Ocarina Of Time* created a brand new template for 3D adventure games that is still being felt today, with Z-targeting being one of the most important features it brought to modern game design. If you need further indication of its brilliance simply play the remake on 3DS; you'd think it was a game from that generation.

THE POD KING

Jon Knoles revisits Episode 1 Racer

What access did you have?

We worked off of photographs of life-sized podracers from the movie set, more detailed smaller scale models used as reference for CG models ILM would later build, photos of miniature sets for the film, and vehicle and character sketches from Lucasfilm's concept artists. Originally, the podracers all looked the same: each had an egg-shaped pod pulled by two massive jet airplane engines. We watched these concepts evolve into visually-distinct vehicles, each with unique silhouettes and colour schemes, and equally diverse alien drivers. I think there were 24 podracers and drivers in the movie, and three of us at Lucasarts built all of them in various levels of detail.

Why set races on different worlds?

We had plenty of conceptual art to serve as reference for the Tatooine race seen in the film, but wanted to take players on a colourful tour of the whole galaxy. We enjoyed a good deal of freedom, and invented planets purely for the game.

How did you design the game?

Three of us designed all of the 20-something tracks in the game. There was one top-down sketch of the Tatooine 'Boonta Eve Classic' race course provided by Lucasfilm, which I used as inspiration and reference when building that track in-game – our first test track. I attempted to build it to scale and discovered it would take nearly 15 minutes to complete a single lap – even at speeds of 400mph! That was too big for our game engine, let alone for fun gameplay. So I reduced it considerably, then widened it accordingly. A great 'ah-ha' moment happened when trying to recreate a big canyon jump. The testers were having a blast seeing how far they could fly, and asked us if we could make the jumps bigger. Before you knew it, we were cutting big holes in every track and making crazy jumps.

Why aren't there any power-ups?

As odd as it sounds, we didn't like the idea of peppering the course with power-ups. We wanted to be as authentic to the film as we could, even given the graphical limitations of the N64. We did agree there had to be a recharge mechanic for using the boost – or you'd just use it all the time, but because Anakin's mechanical repair skills were a big part of the race scene, we wanted to play around with that idea of pushing your vehicle beyond its limits, then being able to fix it on the fly.

SUPER SMASH BROS 1999

HAL LABORATORY

■ Hal Laboratory's four-player punch-em-up remains the best fighter you can play on the system. It's a fast and furious brawler where you must raise a character's damage total so you have a better chance of hitting them out of the themed arenas. It might not be as epic as its sequels, but the fighting mechanics remain incredibly polished and hide a surprising amount of depth.





HARVEST MOON 64 1999

VICTOR INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE

■ Restoring a rundown farm might not sound like fun, but Victor Interactive's sequel proves otherwise. It's a little tougher than its SNES predecessor due to having less time to perform your farming duties, but its structure is far stronger and the ability to marry one of five eligible girls ensures that the game has a lot more depth and reasons to replay it.

BEETLE ADVENTURE RACING 1999

PARADIGM ENTERTAINMENT

■ Known in Australia as *HSV Adventure Racing*, this is an excellent racing game that has you tearing around some brilliantly-designed tracks in the (then) newly-designed Volkswagen Beetle. The exceptional track design really rewards those that explore, allowing adventurous players to discover all sorts of hidden secrets and shortcuts.





SHADOW MAN 1999

ACCLAIM

■ Acclaim released some excellent games on the N64, and this is arguably one of its best. Based on a graphic novel, it's an incredibly mature release for the system, which probably explains why it garnered so much attention. Even without the gore and swearing it remains a fantastic adventure with a neat world-switching mechanic and the chance to hunt down Jack The Ripper.



POKÉMON SNAP 1999

HAL LABORATORY/PAX SOFTNICA

■ No traditional Pokémon games appeared on the N64, but plenty of superb spin-offs did and they were all super effective. This enchanting on-rails snapper has you travelling through a bunch of environments using a variety of objects to entice Pokémon out of hiding and in reach of your camera. Multiple routes and different Pokémon behaviours mean there's always a better opportunity to get a better snap and boost your score.

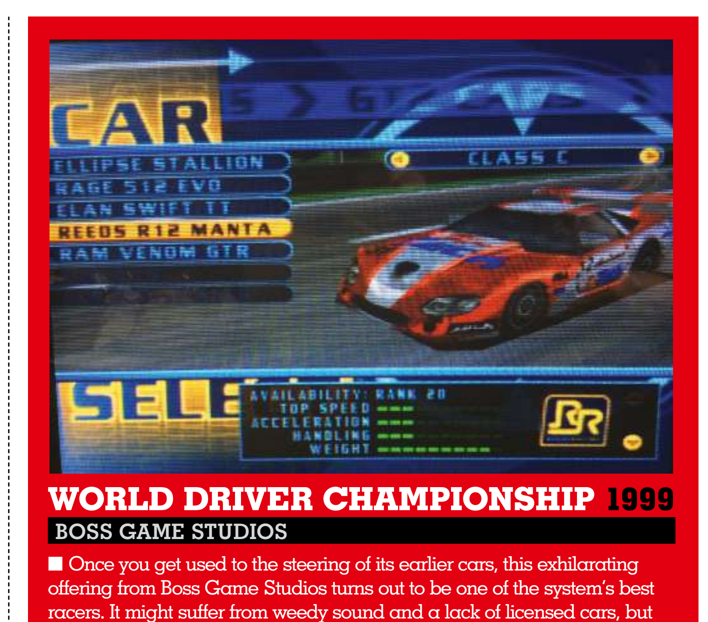




STAR WARS: EPISODE 1 RACER 1999

LUCASARTS

■ Only one *Star Wars* offering was making our list and it's this excellent racer. The track design is brilliant, it captures all the essence of the original podrace sequence and there's plenty of variety between the different pods. You can even use two N64 controllers to recreate the ultimate podracing experience.



WORLD DRIVER CHAMPIONSHIP 1999

BOSS GAME STUDIOS

■ Once you get used to the steering of its earlier cars, this exhilarating offering from Boss Game Studios turns out to be one of the system's best racers. It might suffer from weedy sound and a lack of licensed cars, but the track design and challenging AI more than make up for it.





MARIO GOLF 1999

CAMELOT SOFTWARE PLANNING

■ Notable for its Transfer Pak compatibility that let you upload characters from the Game Boy Color game, Camelot's game kicks all other golf offerings over the green thanks to its accessible mechanics, varied characters, buckets of charm and an array of highly entertaining minigames. The skins match is a particular highlight, showing the diversity between the 10 available characters.



OGRE BATTLE 64: PERSON OF LORDLY CALIBER 1999

QUEST/DUAL CORPORATION

■ The only English version is confined to the US, making this a pricey game to track down. It's worth it though as *Ogre Battle 64* is the best strategy game on the N64 thanks to multiple endings, a large number of classes to master and some extremely challenging maps.

RESIDENT EVIL 2 1999

CAPCOM

■ This superb port is sought after by *Resident Evil* fans as it boasts a number of unique features. There are exclusive alternate costumes, a new randomizer that kicks in upon completing the game, the ability to change the level of gore and 16 new Ex Files, which greatly expands on the franchise's lore.





MAGICAL TETRIS CHALLENGE 1999

CAPCOM

■ A port of Capcom's little known arcade game; this is an excellent Tetris variant that pits classic Disney characters against each other. It's separated from other Tetris games by the amazingly silly Magical Tetris mode, which has you dealing with stupidly oversized pieces that come in a range on un-Tetris like shapes.





CASTLEVANIA: LEGACY OF DARKNESS 1999

KONAMI

■ This is a far better stab at a 3D Castlevania and is effectively a sequel to the original rushed N64 game. In addition to supporting the Expansion Pak, it features two new characters – dropped from the first game – new bosses and areas and a far better camera and framerate. It also includes an enhanced version of the original game, too.



MARIO PARTY 2 1999

HUDSON SOFT

■ Hudson Soft's fun sequel fixes many of the issues of its first party game. There are fewer games that rely on rapidly spinning the N64's analogue stick, the board design is a lot better and less laborious to play through, while the ability to wear themed costumes is a lovely touch. It also adds several new types of games, making it even more competitive than the original.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK 2000

NINTENDO EAD

■ *Majora's Mask* is one of the most interesting games in the Zelda canon, thanks to its perpetually repeating three-day cycle that sees Link using his new Ocarina abilities to stop the moon from crashing into Termina. Masks play a key role in the game too, with the 24 different masks benefitting Link in a variety of different ways.



EXCITEBIKE 64 2000

LEFT FIELD PRODUCTIONS

■ This excellent sequel features a 20-stage campaign mode to race through, a large number of licensed motorbikes, satisfyingly challenging AI opponents and sensational-looking graphics. It's packed with extras too, including the original NES game, a solid 3D update, a fantastic track editor and an excellent randomly generated desert stage.



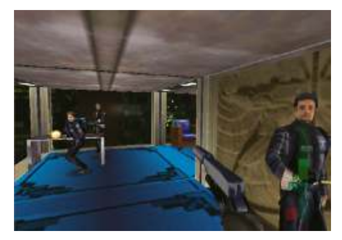


PERFECT DARK 2000

RARE

■ Like *GoldenEye*, *Perfect Dark* shows its age, but it also highlights the creativity that was abundant at Rare. Some of the weapons have still never been bettered within the genre, while the campaign mode remains exceptionally well structured and full of tasks to complete. As with *Blast Corps* and *Banjo-Kazooie*, an enhanced version now exists on Xbox One.





STARCRAFT 64 2000

MASS MEDIA

■ This excellent RTS is now rapidly rising in price and has become incredibly sought after. While it lacked the online options of its PC counterpart and doesn't have the fluidness of control that a mouse offers, it does feature the Brood War expansion pack, a fun split screen mode and several exclusive missions.







MARIO TENNIS 2000

CAMELOT SOFTWARE PLANNING

■ Like *Mario Golf* before it, *Mario Tennis* adds numerous bonuses, including new courts if it's linked to the Game Boy Color game. While it utilises a relatively simple control system, it still allow the 16 available characters to pull off a wide variety of moves. Its minigames aren't quite as polished as the ones found in *Golf*, but its excellent multiplayer mode will test friendships.

TALKING CONKER

Chris Seavor on his foul-mouthed squirrel



Who made the decision to redesign the game?
Twelve Tales, even though it was more similar to *Mario 64* in terms of tone than *Dream* initially, was the one that had to change after *Banjo-Kazooie* became a thing. Having two cutesy first-party 3D platformers coming out at the same time on the same console was questionable, but from the *same* studio wasn't really an option.

What did Nintendo think about the darker tone of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*?
I'm not sure what people at NCL thought, I'm guessing they just trusted Rare. "You wanna do this? Okay… Off you go". As for NOA I didn't really care what they thought, indeed I once got called out by someone at a party. They clearly didn't like *Conker*. I'd also heard of a few other snide comments from a few people, but they'd never actually been in development so what did they know anyway.

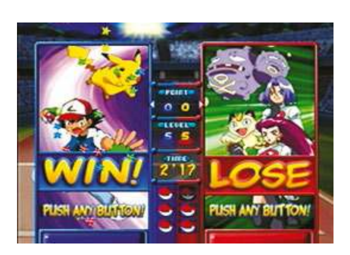
Why choose a squirrel as the main character?
I didn't. That was one of the few things that carried over from TT, where the Squirreliness of Conker had more relevance. Indeed, his initial movement style was on four legs, rather than two, jumping from point to point very much like his real-world counterpart.

Where did the context sensitive mechanic originate?
The catapault pad was Tim [Stamper]'s, if I remember it right, but we definitely ran with it… It was basically our 'Get Out Of Jail Free' card regarding narrative and, not least, an opportunity for a few poor jokes…

What's your favourite film parody from the game and why?
Saving Private Rodent for sure… The amount of work that went into that whole set piece was a game's worth in itself… Everyone on the team were at the top of their game at that point in development and I was really happy how it turned out.







POKÉMON PUZZLE LEAGUE 2000

NINTENDO SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY

■ It may be a simple reskin of *Panel De Pon*, but since that's one of the best puzzle games around we'll forgive it. The competitive multiplayer mode is as addictive as you'd expect, while the new 3D mode adds a satisfying twist to the standard *Panel De Pon* gameplay. Just be aware, though, that some of the AI opponents can be insanely difficult to best.



SIN & PUNISHMENT 2000

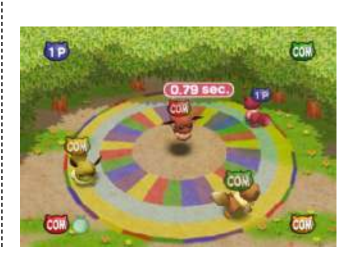
TREASURE

■ Even today Treasure's final N64 game remains an astonishing tour de force, highlighting just what was possible on Nintendo's system. The plot is crazier than a bag of cats, but the action throughout is peerless, delivering some of the finest explosions and boss battles to ever appear on Nintendo's console. A sequel hit the Wii in 2009.

POKÉMON STADIUM 2 2000

NINTENDO EAD

■ Although the N64 never received a proper Pokémon RPG, this enhanced sequel did at least allow you to act out battles in full 3D. Like its predecessor, it made heavy use of the Transfer Pak, enabling you to use Pokémon from the first three Game Boy games, as well as Gold, Silver and Crystal. It's further boosted by a selection of genuinely decent minigames.





PAPER MARIO 2000

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

■ Everything about Intelligent Systems' RPG impresses, from its nuanced gameplay mechanics to the excellent paper-thin aesthetic styling of Mario's world. It's not the most challenging RPG around, but it's filled with character and offers a surprisingly good story as Mario and pals once again attempt to rescue Princess Peach from Bowser.

TUROK 3: SHADOW OF OBLIVION 2000

ACCLAIM STUDIOS AUSTIN

■ You can't have an N64 list without a Turok game, it's the law. *Turok 3* is far tighter in its design than the rambling *Seeds Of Evil* and features a robust multiplayer mode that borrows the AI bot system featured in *Perfect Dark*. It's all rounded off with some of the best boss encounters to be found in the series.



CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY 2001

RARE

■ Rare's last game was a fitting swansong for Nintendo's console. Technically it's a triumph, while its lowbrow humour and buckets of gore was a world away from Rare's earlier work on the console. It might have been bettered on Microsoft's Xbox, but the N64 version is far more desirable with pristine copies selling for hundreds online.







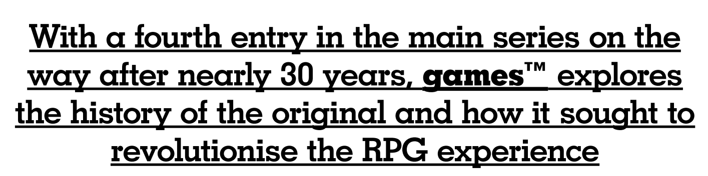





BEHIND THE SCENES

TALES OF THE UNKNOWN: VOLUME I


THE BARD'S TALE


With a fourth entry in the main series on the way after nearly 30 years, **games**™ explores the history of the original and how it sought to revolutionise the RPG experience



















■ This is the game's opening on Apple II, a novel way of introducing the game with an animated, music-driven song of the bard.

Released: 1985
Format: Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Apple II, Apple IIGS, Macintosh, Atari ST, Commodore 64, MS-DOS, NES, ZX Spectrum, NEC PC-9801
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Key Staff: Brian Fargo (Designer), Michael Cranford (Lead designer/ programmer), Rebecca Heineman (programmer)

IT'S ALWAYS FASCINATING COVERING A GAME FROM SO MANY DECADES AGO. It's like staring at your reflection in a slow-moving river; all the parts are still there and still look much the same as they should, but somehow the the visage is barely recognisable. With our modern eyes, it's hard to look back into the past of games made years ago and visualise a time where there was no industry to speak of; teams of little more than ten, sales that rarely reached more than 50,000 and only a handful of leading publishers. For RPG players of the Eighties, there would have only been a couple of names worth knowing: *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. The two had single-handedly cornered the market, popularising what would come to be known as the 'dungeon crawl RPG' with their emphasis on random combat and intense difficulty. They each launched their debut in 1981, and quickly built a following from there. There may not have been an industry in place to properly advertise these products, but they still found a way to become significant names.

"Back in 1981 the computer business was so small that there was one top ten chart that covered games, business applications, productivity," explains Brian Fargo, founder of Interplay, "basically, all genres. *Wizardry* used to constantly outsell applications like *VisiCalc* – the precursor to *Excel* – so I knew games were a big deal." While computers themselves weren't quite as commonplace as they are now, there was an excitement around the technology. And so if *Wizardry* was competing with the likes of home office software then it was clear it was a game worth paying attention to. "*Wizardry* was my absolute favourite," adds Fargo, "as it gave me a chance to get my D&D experience without having to get my friends together. It was tough, it was immersive and it was deep. But it also lacked music, colour and it didn't run on a C64." Fargo had founded Interplay in 1982 with an intention of taking on the big names in the industry. He had been inspired by the likes of *Wizardry* but wanted to do so much more with it: add in better visuals, bring in music and sound and create gameplay innovations that other developers would be looking towards for years after.

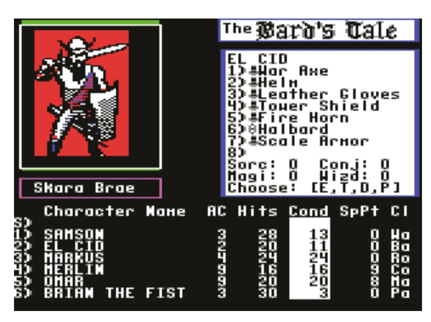
It was when Fargo and his old high school friend Michael Cranford got together that the direction would really be set. The pair had a shared interest in D&D, the emergent, personal experiences that were born from their tabletop sessions ultimately having a direct impact on the way that the game could be played. It all began with a demo, made by Cranford, that convinced Fargo of the route they should be taking. Rebecca Heineman, one of the central developers throughout The Bard's Tale franchise, described it as a "very simple demo of walking through a city". There was no combat, but it was enough to guide the project. "Computers back then could normally do just one thing at a time," explains Fargo, "you want to play music then the game has to stop and play the tune. One of Michael's friends had written some code that would allow the computer to play music and let the player continue with the gameplay, it was a wonderful innovation to have the tune run seamlessly while the player walked down halls and fought monsters."

This was ultimately what led the development of the game down the path of the bard – and its finalised subtitle – rather than focusing on the warriors, rogues and wizards that RPGs so commonly used at the time. "It only made sense to add the bard," says Fargo of the inspiration behind the addition of the class, "knowing that music was going to be a big part of the game." And so one of the first intriguing additions to the game was the bard class, a unique playable character that could have a repertoire of songs that, when played, would affect the game world. This could've been to bolster the party members in some way, enhance their abilities in combat or even

WIZARDRY USED TO CONSTANTLY OUTSELL APPLICATIONS LIKE THE PRECURSOR TO EXCEL – SO I KNEW GAMES WERE A BIG DEAL



■ The same intro on the MS-DOS version, however, proves what a step-up in visuals this version of the game was.





LEARN TO GROW

The ways that The Bard's Tale IV seeks to revitalise the dungeon crawl

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The first thing to notice in the next Bard's Tale is how movement has been changed from the rigid grid-based system that practically every dungeon crawl RPG is built on. Though it can still be played as such, there is now so much more freedom of movement when it comes to exploration. Important for finding secrets.



HARDCORE MODE

Lessons have been learnt this time around, and now the game's difficult has been tailored for a more modern audience. This means it likely won't deter any would be gamer hoping to get involved, but for those who will miss the series' famed punishment then there is hardcore mode – which even removes the game's map.



AN ACTUAL STORY

While the early RPG genre is rarely known for compelling storylines, the fourth game is at least intending to take a better stab at it than the original trilogy did. It carries on from the third game – which is a nice touch for fans – but promises to have a lot more in terms of lore and characters.



ALL-NEW COMBAT

The Bard's Tale's combat was acceptable at the time, a series of text-based responses following on from a string of actions chosen by the player. Well now gamers need more, and here we'll have it. It's more akin to *Final Fantasy Tactics*, but makes use of party-wide action points, heavy importance on positioning and learning skills from weapons.



GET CHATTY

Although there haven't been any examples of it seen just yet, InXile has promised that there will be more interactions with NPCs this time around, and beyond simply accepting quests too. There is going to be a dialogue system, but how that will work isn't yet clear.



light the dark corridors of a dungeon without the need of fire or temporary spells. This, in turn, led to multiple uses throughout the campaign, with certain areas reliant on – or made easier by – the inclusion of a bard in the party. Interestingly, however, not everyone would have known that.

"Our roots were in D&D and there certainly was no requirement to have a certain party makeup to win," recalls Fargo, "we didn't want *The Bard's Tale* to be any different. Part of the fun is debating what an optimal group of adventurers is." This would ultimately become one of the more defining features of not only the original game but the franchise as a whole. It confused many at first as they struggled to make the most of the utter freedom, but as players got to grips with the choice of group composition it gave players far more reason to return to the game. This, of course, was a focus for the development from the start, as Fargo explains: "More of the emphasis of the game back then was on the puzzle design, combat difficulty and an open-ended approach to beating it." In fact this was the only approach the designers took. There was little reason to delve deep into an intricate world or story and characters; this was an industry still learning mechanics, systems and gameplay, there was no consideration for an involved tale to draw players in. *The Bard's Tale*'s city of Skara Brae was no different, while it may well have been uninspired it was intended as little more than a canvas for the game's combat. "There was little thought put into the world sense of the early trilogy, though it got a deeper as we moved into *Bard's Tale 3*."

And so it was that the game's main villain, Magnar, was little more than an overarching goal. The game began simply, requiring players to locate a specific inn and enter into the sewers, a moment that has since become humorously overused throughout the history of RPGs. But that wasn't such an easy task; with no real map to speak of and no real goal or direction handed over to the player, this wasn't quite as simple as it might have first seemed. In mimicking *Wizardry*'s difficulty, Interplay created a game that was punishing – which put off as many as it drew in. *The Bard's Tale* would come to be known as an excruciatingly difficult game, where it was possible for your entire party to be wiped out while just exploring the town. But this was all to highlight the central – and most integral – aspect of the game: its combat. "The thing that the player spends the most time with in most RPGs is combat," says Fargo, "but especially so with a dungeon crawl. If the player is going to spend 40 hours doing something, it better be engaging. We made the games very challenging – you could experience death at any moment, including in the first five minutes. I also think the difficulty forced people to really pay attention constantly – manage your resources poorly or push too deep in a dungeon and you could lose hours. Having that kind of pressure tends to keep your attention." Part of this struggle was inspired by Fargo and the team's D&D sessions, which were also more than a little bit challenging. "It probably came from the fact that we tended to like to punish each other in our D&D games and that we were overly familiar with playing the game. When you make a game you always lose sight of what a first timer's experience will be." According to Heineman, a lot of the game's difficulty came from Cranford's ideology as a Dungeon Master,



■ With no in-game map – as was typical – navigating the game was one of the toughest challenges.

suggesting that if he could kill each of his players in a session of D&D then he would claim victory. "And he actually took this glee in killing off the party," she adds, "the total party kills, they like to call them in D&D. Well he took that a little bit in his games as well, in that he thinks that if a person plays his game and that person gets killed then he can say 'I win!'"

This wasn't helped much by certain elements that are commonplace nowadays simply not being considered. Equipping your party with basic weaponry from the get go, restricting combat encounters by level or even a basic map were all features missing from the game, and completely by design, too. "We didn't consider the need for a map. Again our roots were D&D, so mapping to graph paper seemed obvious and mini maps were just not that used at the time. The added variable of being lost did add to the tension of course." And that tension was there throughout, courtesy of the fact that the game could only be saved in a single location. This meant all the progress made in the game was at risk at any point, and the fact that even the low-level thugs at the start could decimate a party meant players really needed to be on their toes. Fargo highlights the popularity of the Dark Souls series of permadeath rogue-likes as a sign that they were on to something with this extreme difficulty. "We just didn't mind if the players died early on as we knew it would create a greater sense of accomplishment. Better to have a game a bit too hard than too easy, but certainly finding that sweet spot between the two is optimal."

CRANFORD ACTUALLY TOOK THIS GLEE IN KILLING OFF THE PARTY

But finding that 'sweet spot' was tough. This was at a time when there were no standards that were commonly expected, limited debugging and testing tools and most certainly there were no QA teams. "Balancing was pretty much Michael and myself," says Fargo, "if we made the game challenging for us then we knew it would be for others. We always knew the players would be smart and would very quickly get up to speed on understanding the tactical approach to winning. We never treated the audience like children, even if they were, players at all ages pick things up fast." Extreme difficulty wasn't such an unusual trait of games at the time, though, and so players were able to overcome the odds.

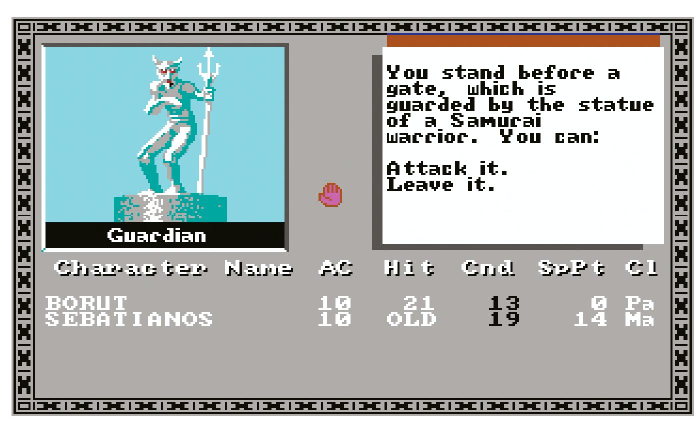
And thanks to the game's open-ended nature, *The Bard's Tale* would play host to a wide variety of intriguing strategies. In much the same way YouTubers and Twitch streamers attempt to finish a challenging game with a *Guitar Hero* peripheral or a dance mat, players of *The Bard's Tale* would impose their own restrictions to make the game even harder. "I think the self-inflicted difficulty level was always fascinating," says Fargo. "People would try to beat the game with one character even though it was punishing enough as is. We would get fan letters and we would always enjoy reading about their personal experiences."

WHAT THEY SAID...

There is enough in the way of monsters, dungeons, tricks, traps, puzzles, and mysterious magical goodies to keep you busy for quite some time! And for you cartographers out there, be prepared to do *a lot* of mapping.

Computer Gaming World, 1985











I suspect that the game will be more successful than many of its predecessors. There is enough in the game to last several months at least. And it's very easy to get lost in Skara Brae...

ZZap!64, 1986

With much of the design handled by Cranford and Fargo and put into place early on, a lot of the work on the rest of the game was building the systems that would make it really stand out. This meant high resolution art, intricate sprites and a smooth implementation of them all. If *The Bard's Tale* was going to stand out – and more importantly take on the likes of *Ultima* – then it needed to excel in every area. It wasn't enough to just be another copycat dungeon crawl RPG, this was to be the start for Interplay and it wouldn't be right if it didn't make absolutely everything the best it could be. That was where Heineman mostly came in, creating all the systems and the tools needed for the game engine. "At the time I was the one at Interplay that was writing all the games," says Heineman. "I wrote *Mind Shadow*, *Borrowed Time*, *Tass In Timetown* and it's the technology that I used for the graphic rendering that ended up in *The Bard's Tale*. And for *The Bard's Tale* I also wrote all the art tools and all the graphic engines, all the disc drivers, and all the behind-the-scenes stuff." These art tools were perhaps the most decisive addition to the game, enabling a much higher quality of images than was common at the time, especially in its competition. It was the significant reason why *The Bard's Tale* was able to achieve such popularity so quickly. "Then I ended up – because I knew all the code – doing all the ports," adds Heineman. "I did the 2GS version, a C64 version and I think we even did a prototype on Atari 2600 but that never shipped. I did all these different versions of these games." When most of the other dungeon crawl RPGs were little more than wireframe and simple sprites, *The Bard's Tale* barrelled onto the market with colourful, animated scenes that – although basic and aged by today's standards – were hard to ignore. "The major impetus behind *The Bard's Tale* was to make sure that we brought the world to life as best we could," says Fargo. "Even though the simple animation on the portraits was small, it gave it a certain charm that people really loved."

IT'S WHEN ALL THE ELEMENTS COME TOGETHER PROPERLY THAT YOU CREATE SOMETHING SPECIAL

But in truth there was a feud between Heineman and Cranford, the pair maintaining a rough working relationship mostly due to the former's keenness to offer a critical eye to the project that Cranford was largely seeing as his own. The pair would clash surrounding topics such as the balancing for the game's difficulty, the inclusion of female characters or other technical changes to the code. Despite their clashes, however, the game was on the way to completion before a new drama arose. Cranford had been working as a contractor on the project rather than as an employee of Interplay, with Heineman claiming that he just "did not want to be an employee". However, no official contract was written up, and so when the game was

> A GAMING EVOLUTION The Bard's Tale > Dragon Wars > The Bard's Tale IV



Due to licensing problems, *Dragon Wars* could not be named *The Bard's Tale IV*. However it would have been the ultimate release, with bigger maps, night and day gameplay and even more puzzles.



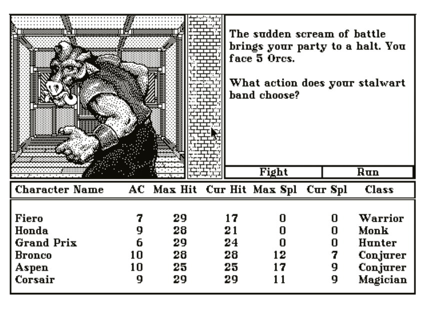
With 30 years between the original trilogy, a lot changed here. Full-3D visuals, new combat and a better story. It retains the genre conventions, but recreates them in modern ways.

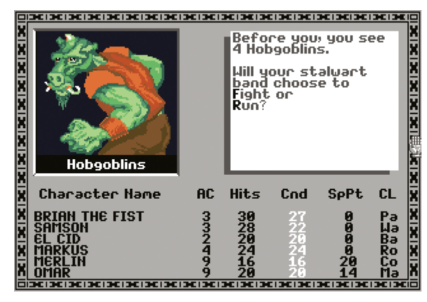


close to completion Cranford held his work hostage, literally refusing to hand over the disc until a contract was signed. "I mean Brian was pissed off at that," says Heineman, who explains that no agreement had been set in stone. A new contract was signed, one that would ultimately give Cranford complete control over the planned sequel, a compromise that Fargo was willing to make to ensure the release of the game.

The Bard's Tale was finally released in 1985 for Apple II before countless ports were released in the years that followed, covering everything from C64 and ZX Spectrum to the NES and the Amiga. As an industry was beginning to form – and therefore a more concentrated media focus – *The Bard's Tale* was able to draw in a huge fanbase. It received a number of very positive reviews, which translated over to well over 400,000 sales in the Eighties, making it one of the best-selling games of the decade, even topping those Fargo and company had set out to dethrone from the beginning. Though *Ultima* and *Wizardry* would continue to churn out sequels, the burgeoning interest in *The Bard's Tale* could not be stopped. "As usual with these types of things, it's when all the elements come together properly that you create something special," says Fargo. "Moving around in colourful 3D worlds the way *The Bard's Tale* did was not commonplace and people really liked the graphics, though they look crude by today's standards." It ended up being a defining title for Interplay, too, whose adventure games weren't offering the same great success, bolstering the company's income and expanding its opportunities. "My lessons were more business-oriented," Fargo explains when asked how *The Bard's Tale*'s success changed his approach to game development. "It was the first time we received royalty cheques, where royalty rates moved from the theoretical to reality and it made me look hard at how I could move Interplay to the next level as a company. It's been an incredible ride since then."

And though the company may well have fallen by the wayside, the phoenix from its ashes – Fargo's current company InXile Entertainment – has gone on from strength to strength by leveraging the gameplay and titles of Interplay's strong heritage. That's the very reason a true sequel to the original classic trilogy is now on the horizon. With *The Bard's Tale IV* aiming for a revitalisation of the dungeon crawl RPG in 2018 after a very successful Kickstarter campaign, it's clear the significance of *The Bard's Tale* name hasn't dulled with age. It might be three decades old and the industry might have changed a lot, but Fargo and his team are looking to prove once more that *The Bard's Tale* can still impact the industry as it once did.





■ In *The Bard's Tale*, combat was handled through a series of command inputs, after which the battle would unfold dependant on the various stats of everyone involved.

AND THEY WILL COME...

How a simple feature brought over many more players

One feature that is often overlooked is how Fargo decided to include the ability to import your characters over from *Wizardry* or *Ultima III*, therefore drawing in many more fans looking to continue their adventures. "I thought it was a brilliant idea to bring over the audience from those two games," says Fargo, "and at the same time reward them with a headstart with their characters." Of course the strategy wasn't so appreciated when the other two titles caught wind of the act, even seeking to stop Interplay from capitalising on the two popular RPGs "Somewhere I have the nasty letter from Sir-Tech demanding we stop, but there was nothing wrong with that feature. Later on I became friends with the Siroteks and we all had a good laugh about it."







RETRO INTERVIEW

MARTY O'DONNELL

Few individuals have made a mark on gaming's musical landscape quite like the Halo composer. **games™** invited him to reflect on an extraordinary career

YOU HAD A LONG career in commercials working with fellow composer Michael Salvatori before you shifted gears in to the games industry together in the early Nineties. How did that transition come about?
An intern working for us at the time had friends who were working on the beta version of *Myst*. He showed me this game and I told him that I wanted to meet them, which is how I eventually got to do sound design for *Riven* – the sequel to *Myst*.

What was it that struck you about *Myst*'s use of music at the time?
I loved playing video games, but I was never intrigued or attracted to the thought of doing what, for example, Koji Kondo or Nobuo Uematsu did, mainly because the fidelity on the Nintendo systems was so limited as to what they could do. I loved *Zelda* and I loved *Final Fantasy*, but I was not attracted to doing that kind of work. It just seemed really, really hard and the payoff, musically, wasn't very high. When I saw *Myst* in 1993, there were no games out there using a film score approach to audio design and music. They took a giant leap forward and I was ready to jump in.

We understand you first became aware of Bungie because the guys making *Riven* were playing *Marathon* obsessively?
The guys at Cyan, the people who made *Myst*, stopped every afternoon to play multiplayer LAN-party *Marathon*. They were completely addicted to it, so I needed to find out more about Bungie. And it turned out that Bungie was literally down the street from me in Chicago, so I contacted them and got a gig with them right away.

I HAD PUSHBACK FROM PEOPLE HIGH UP, EVEN IN BUNGIE, WHO FELT THAT THERE WAS WAY TOO MUCH 'WANKING GUITAR' IN HALO 2

You started out freelancing before joining Bungie full time, didn't you?
Mike and I worked on *Myth* and *Myth II* and we were already starting work with them on early *Halo* and *Oni*… Then, through a series of circumstances, I ended up joining them full time ten days before E3 2000 where we showed a ten-minute long *Halo* trailer to the world… Microsoft was there and they made an offer we couldn't refuse.

When did the score for *Halo* start to evolve?
When I had this opportunity to do a live demo for Macworld, which was introduced by Steve Jobs in the summer of 1999. It suddenly occurred to me that we had to put on a show and we had no music. The game played on a Mac, but the sound engine didn't. I told [former

ON PAUL MCCARTNEY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO DESTINY

"I just feel that that's the sad part – based on how much fun we had and how creative it was, people today go, "Oh, Paul wrote that one song that was in the credits." And that's it. That's all people think. And he didn't. He wrote all sorts of themes that are still, to this moment, being heard in *Destiny*. And nobody knows what that is because I haven't been allowed to talk about it."

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Halo: Combat Evolved
[2001] Audio Lead / Composer



Halo 2
[2004] Sound Director / Composer



Halo 3
[2007] Audio Director / Composer



Halo 3: ODST
[2009] Audio Director / Composer



Halo: Reach
[2010] Audio Director / Composer



Destiny
[2014] Composer



ON GOLEM'S PREQUEL ALBUM

> It's something very personal. There's no corporate support. To actually tell fans on Kickstarter: "Here's what I want to do," and to have people support it and put it in their hands is incredibly satisfying, especially after some of the other stuff that's gone on over the last few years. It's a labour of love. I'm not having to play tracks for some marketing and PR board asking how this fits in. I don't have any of that, which is great.



O'Donnell's work on the Halo franchise spanned 12 years. His iconic work continues to define the series to this day.

Bungie president] Alex Seropian, "Let me make a really big score with live musicians and singers and we'll play it on a CD at the same time the live demo plays," which is exactly what we did. Someone pressed the play button the exact time that [Bungie co-founder] Jason Jones hit the space bar on the stage and we just crossed our fingers and hoped that it was all in sync. So many things could have gone wrong. We had just barely gotten that thing together.

So the *Halo* score was a natural progression from what you'd prepared for Macworld?

There were a couple of iconic moments – the monks singing at the very beginning and the theme that was played on the cellos – so I knew that we had two powerful pieces of musical equity that we could continue to build on.

You scored *Halo* as you would a movie, scene-by-scene. How important was that process to you?

It's so important that it's the only way I'll do it to this day. If you do it any other way you're essentially just creating a library and having somebody else make the decisions about where music goes… If you're going to truly score the emotional journey, you have to have something as a composer that you can feel and look at and play… If you don't have that context, I think you're really sort of writing blind. I just don't like doing it that way.

***Halo 2* featured a much more bombastic score. How did that come about?**

With all the success we had with *Halo*, suddenly I was getting requests from people like Nile Rodgers. He had bands like Incubus and Breaking Benjamin and people like John Mayer and Steve Vai calling me saying that they wanted to be part of whatever was happening musically in *Halo 2*. So I had a lot of really interesting stuff to work with that people had given me – this big sort of prog rock music. It was my job to figure out where to put it.

By *Halo 3* you had a well-established sound. How did you approach that score?

Looking back, I had gotten a lot of pushback from people high up, even in Bungie, who felt that there was way too much 'wanking guitar' – literally calling it 'guitar wank' – in *Halo 2*. Believe it or not, during the making of *Halo 2*, a bug report landed on my desk and it said, "Turn down the guitar whammy." It was just amazing to me. I was like, "Look, this is not a bug. I don't want some tester telling me some aesthetic thing," but that was it.

So *Halo 3*'s piano theme was a reaction to that?

When we started working on the opening trailer for *Halo 3*, I did this thing at the piano thinking I would orchestrate it, but I kept liking the way it sounded. Knowing what happens at E3 and knowing that all these trailers were going to be big and bombastic, nobody was going to start with piano. It was just a strategic, tactical call. And I had a tonne of pushback on that. The higher ups at Microsoft were saying, "You're gonna fix that, right?" I heard at one point that an early version of the trailer with a rough piano track was played for the marketing department at Microsoft and they actually laughed.

The piano theme is so iconic now. It seems crazy in hindsight?

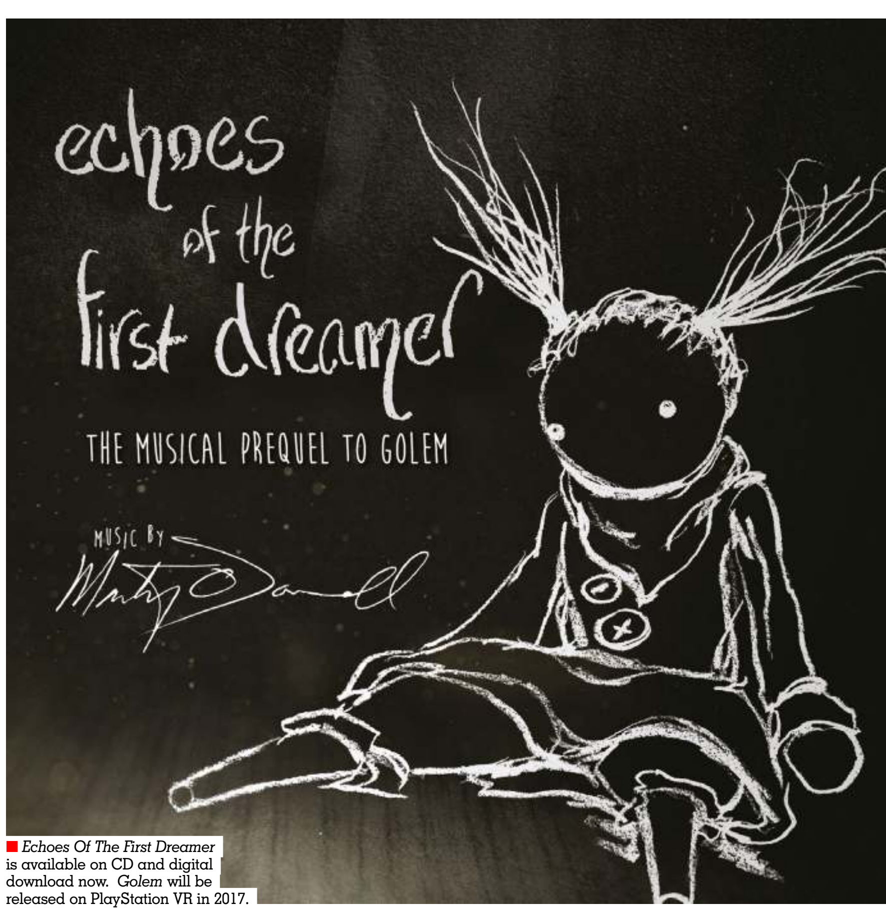
Maybe I'm just a stubborn person, but the more people that pushed back against it, the more determined I was for it to make it in there. It was quite possible that that piano theme could have been killed if I had listened to all those people.

***ODST* was a departure for the franchise. You threw out the existing themes, but piano still plays an integral part in the score?**

[Director of Cinematics] Joe Staten's idea was that this was going to be a story that feels like film noir, so he suggested some jazz influences… For a composer, to hear, "From a genre standpoint, let's have some smoky jazz club feel to this," was just wonderful.

What did you learn from *ODST* going in to *Reach*? *Reach* was a game about loss. Was that the key theme going in?

From the beginning, the audience knows how it's going to end. Nobody is going to live. That



Echoes Of The First Dreamer is available on CD and digital download now. *Golem* will be released on PlayStation VR in 2017.

was an interesting set of constraints from an emotional standpoint because we knew that every character would die and there needed to be a reason why these characters died. The final death of Noble 6 was the one time that we wanted you to feel that you really were dying.

Was saying goodbye to the Halo franchise a bittersweet moment for you having worked on it for so many years?
Yeah and, in hindsight, it's even more bittersweet now. I really, really loved working on Halo. If you consider the fact that I first started working on Halo in 1998 and then we finished *Reach* in 2010, there's a solid twelve years of my life that was just 100% Halo. It was hard to let go of those characters and, for me, it was hard to let go of that huge library of music too. There was so much music that we had done and we couldn't use those themes anymore.

You began work on a *Destiny* prequel album, *Music Of The Spheres*, way before the game was released, didn't you? Could you tell us a little about that process?
I finished *Music Of The Spheres* at the end of 2012 and I started working with Paul McCartney in 2011, so we're talking a solid three years before the game was released. A very small team was working on *Destiny* while we were working on *ODST* and *Reach*, so I started writing early concepts way back then. Some of that stuff I still hear in *Destiny* today.

How did Paul McCartney get involved?
He was introduced to the size of the game industry when he and Ringo came out on stage for *Beatles Rock Band* [at E3 2009] and, believe it or not, the person who had come out before Ringo and Paul was Joe Staten showing *ODST*… Apparently that got people thinking. There was a guy in LA who had done a lot of work to get actors for me and he had his people contact Paul and ask if he was interested. I met with him and he was super-interested. He started working on ideas and sending me themes and musical snippets… Mixing that was definitely a high point of my career and then, after that, a bunch of other stuff happened and unfortunately *Music Of The Spheres* has still never been heard in its original form.

AN EARLY VERSION WITH A ROUGH PIANO TRACK WAS PLAYED FOR THE MARKETING DEPARTMENT AT MICROSOFT AND THEY ACTUALLY LAUGHED.

Since leaving Bungie, you've gone independent with your own company, Highwire Games. How did that come about?
One of my absolute favourite designers at Bungie, Jaime Griesemer, was one of the first people caught in the sea change at Bungie. I happened to have lunch with him within the weeks before I was let go from Bungie and he said, "Well, we need to work together." We found another guy named Jared Noftle who has been in the game industry a long time, so the three of us got together and made a small independent studio. Jaime wanted to work on VR and in very short order, we had a contract to do a bunch of prototype game ideas for PlayStation VR. After six to eight months, that turned in to one that everyone thought might be an interesting one, which was *Golem*.

And you were finally able to release a prequel album in the form of *Echoes Of The First Dreamer*?
The funny thing is, as soon as we knew we could do *Golem*, Jaime said, "Why don't you do a prequel album and actually ship it this time?" It was no more than that. We had very little of the story, we just had some outlines of characters and a few environments and then we got a Kickstarter going. It was up to me to write the music and produce it and find a distributor and no one could say no, including Sony. It's completely independent and very personally satisfying.

The game was known as Starwing in Europe as Star Fox was considered too close to StarVox, a German company. The same happened again with Lylat Wars on N64.

GAME CHANGERS

STAR FOX

Released: 21 February 1993 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Argonaut Software, Nintendo **System:** SNES

Nintendo's homage to sci-fi epics was not only an important entry into its pantheon of heroes, but a fantastic example of its commitment to technological innovation

NINTENDO IS OFTEN impugned, wrongfully to our minds, as being a company perennially behind the times, slow to adopt new technologies and slower still to innovate. Critics of the company will often cite the Japanese publisher's reliance on a handful of key franchises generation after generation as evidence of this creative immobility.

Star Fox is a wonderful example of how this simply has never been the case. When it was released in 1993 it wasn't the first attempt at making a 3D game, nor even the first to launch on a console, but it was technologically one of the most ambitious, pushing the boundaries of what was thought possible on a 16-bit machine. The same year *Doom* would be landing on PCs and *Daytona USA* would arrive in arcades, but such experiences wouldn't be available on consoles for at least another year and certainly nothing close was thought possible on a home console.

ARGONAUT FIRST IMPRESSED NINTENDO BY BYPASSING THE PUBLISHER'S OWN COPYRIGHT SAFEGUARDS ON THE GAME BOY

Star Fox managed to create a third-person shooter experience, albeit on rails, full of colour, action and polygonal objects with fantastic maneuverability. By modern standards it may be a lot of smoke and mirrors and may be limited by its hardware, but it was a revelation of technology and design for its time and spurred the SNES on for the next four years as Nintendo bypassed the 32-bit era and headed straight for the N64. It was also a stunning collaboration between East and West.

Argonaut Games was the team largely responsible for making *Star Fox* a reality. It first impressed Nintendo by bypassing the publisher's own copyright safeguards on the Game Boy and convincing

A HISTORY OF INNOVATION

STAR FOX HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF NINTENDO'S EXPERIMENTATIONS OVER THE YEARS



SUPER FX CHIP

★ *Star Fox* introduced the Super FX Chip, giving the game far greater graphical processing power than the SNES alone would have been capable of. Its introduction would go on to improve a number of other games, most notably *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*, which used the Super FX Chip 2.



RUMBLE PACK

★ *Star Fox 64* or *Lylat Wars* in Europe was packaged with a new attachment for the N64 controller, the Rumble Pak. This is one of the first examples of haptic feedback being implemented for a games console and would prove popular enough that such functionality has been built into controllers ever since.



HANDHELD ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

★ Nintendo turned to Q-Games for *Star Fox Command*, which is notable for that fact that its founder, Dylan Cuthbert, worked on the original *Star Fox* and Super FX Chip with Argonaut Games. This release brought online multiplayer to the series via the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection. As such it was the first Star Fox with online play.

it that it could improve on its own 3D shooter, *Starglider*, released on Atari and Amiga in 1986. This young, upstart team of developers based in Colindale in North West London was even more unlikely a collaborator for the Kyoto-based firm back in the early Nineties than such a collaboration would seem today. But its technical prowess in rendering 3D visuals on relatively limited hardware was already very impressive and Nintendo wisely saw potential in working together.

And so it was that Argonaut handled the technology and programming of *Star Fox* while Nintendo, lead by Shigeru Miyamoto as producer on the project, offered its expertise in design and story. It was Miyamoto who pushed for the game to star anthropomorphised animals, themselves inspired by creatures from Japanese folklore that he regularly saw in a shrine close to Nintendo's Japanese headquarters. So while much of the sci-fi influence for *Star Fox* was taken from *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Thunderbirds*, it struck out in its own way with a different team of heroes to what we had seen elsewhere and a different sensibility.

In terms of gameplay, *Star Fox* brought incredible immediacy and tactility to space combat. *Star Wars* games and other shooters had attempted to recreate interplanetary combat in gaming form, but Nintendo smartly worked within the confines of an on-rails system, allowing plenty of movement within a constrained window and pacing the experience perfectly. The first moment you encounter a boss battle in the game, as alarms sound and the music changes rhythm from upbeat action to something far more ominous and foreboding (like *Out Run* switching to *Castlevania*), it's a truly spine-tingling experience. The sense of threat and scale at work here was far more epic than the SNES could have any right to expect given its limited power.



■ A promotional version of the game called *Super Star Fox Weekend (Official Competition)* was released in Europe and North America, but only for competitive play as it used a timed stage mechanic to gather top scores.

■ While *Star Fox 2* was cancelled, many of its features, such as all-range mode for full 3D space combat, were introduced in *Star Fox 64* instead.

■ Falco is not a falcon, but a pheasant, as this was another animal in the Kyoto shrine from which the creative team found inspiration.

Which brings us to the true triumph and long-lasting influence of *Star Fox* for which Argonaut gets the credit, since none of polygonal trickery and grand set pieces would have been possible without the game's in-built Super FX chip. Included inside the cartridge of every copy of the game, the Super FX chip greatly enhances the graphical processing ability of the SNES, allowing for far more advanced techniques, in this instance the polygonal ships and enemies of *Star Fox*. The Super FX chip would go on to impact a number of other games, however, including *Stunt Race FX* and *Dirt Racer*. An updated version of the chip, which would have powered the cancelled and recently revived *Star Fox 2*, would bring *Doom*, *Winter Gold* and *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* to the system, proving that the chip was able to bring a lot more to the table than just 3D effects, but vastly improved 2D texturing, allowing the vision of concept artists to come to life in unbelievable ways.

Thanks to the success of *Star Fox* a number of its core team were actually hired by Nintendo and would go on to great success working in Japan. Most notable among them was probably Dylan Cuthbert who went on to found Q-Games and the PixelJunk series. As for Fox McCloud, we've seen him and his team of merry animals take on adventures on virtually every format of Nintendo consoles since 1993, on a number of occasions actually re-telling the same story as this original game.

Star Fox's breakthrough graphical styling and its technological advances are thought to have been a massive influence on Miyamoto and Nintendo's thinking about the future of the company and its franchises as a new 3D era of gaming was close at hand. Without this first introduction, experiment and gamble on a new innovation, games like *Super Mario 64* may not have appeared so soon after.

GAME CHANGERS

8 BEST TEAMS IN GAMING

SOME GAMES ARE MADE SO MUCH BETTER BY THE CREW YOU GET TO WORK WITH, AS THESE TITLES PROVED



TEAM STAR FOX (STAR FOX, 1993)

This ragtag group of mercenaries are recruited by the Corneria military to pilot experimental Arwing fighter ships as Andros and his forces attack the Lylat system. The team of Fox McCloud, Falco Lombardi, Slippy Toad and Peppy Hare have since become staples of the Nintendo family, appearing in further sequels (often remakes) to *Star Fox* as well as spin-off appearances in titles like *Super Smash Bros*. For their first appearance the simple camaraderie of the squad shines through clearly.



S.T.A.R.S. ALPHA TEAM (RESIDENT EVIL, 1996)

The Special Tactics And Rescue Service of the Raccoon City Police Department are sent in to investigate a series of mysterious murders, leading them to an abandoned mansion. What would unfold in that mansion and all of the events since have firmly established Chris Redfield, Barry Burton, Jill Valentine and Albert Wesker as legends in the history of gaming.



AVALANCHE (FINAL FANTASY VII, 1997)

While Cloud Strife's team of warriors isn't really referred to as Avalanche, they are essentially the latest incarnation of the eco-terrorist organisation, adjusting its primary focus from bringing to light the harmful effects of Mako Reactors used by the Shinra Electric Power Company to stopping rogue SOLDIER fighter, Sephiroth. Its many members have lived on as some of the most popular heroes in the lifetime of Final Fantasy as a franchise.



DELTA SQUAD (GEARS OF WAR, 2006)

Forced together as their respective units were wiped out by Locust forces, Marcus Fenix became the defacto leader of one of the most macho teams of soldiers in the history of gaming. Their testosterone levels were so high we're surprised their bulging biceps didn't rip the armour right off their bodies. But perhaps more important than their bravado was their brotherhood, as the four men became close allies and even closer friends through the trials of this game.





NORMANDY SR-2 CREW (MASS EFFECT 2, 2010)

Every member of Shepard's team has their own reasons for being on board the Normandy and thanks to the loyalty mission structure of the game you often get a chance to see those reasons up close. And then it turns out that they're all badasses when it comes to combat, tech and biotics, making them the only group in the galaxy that can stop the Collectors, so that's not bad either.



NOBLE TEAM (HALO: REACH, 2010)

The events of the fall of Reach were well known to Halo fans long before Bungie committed them to the Xbox 360, and yet the struggles and sacrifice of Noble Team was no less poignant or effecting for its inevitability. We had been so used to experiencing the life of a Spartan through the solo efforts of John-117 that getting to see a team of these enhanced warriors at war was something very special indeed. Their sacrifice will not be forgotten.



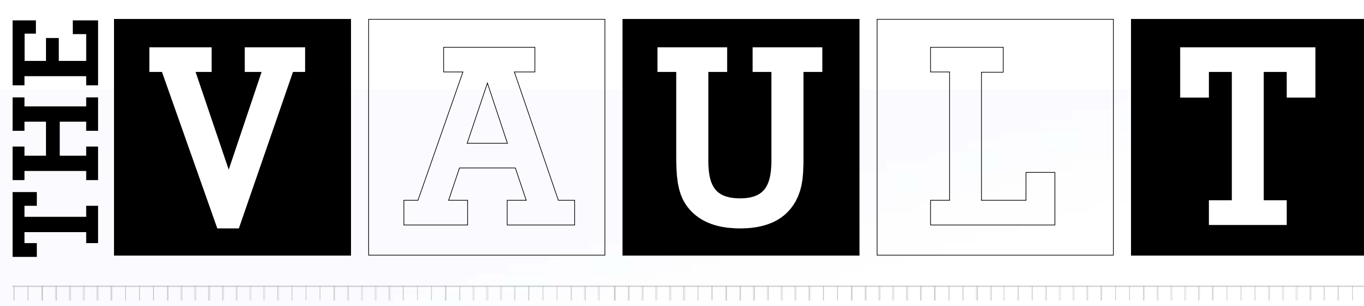
THE SURVIVORS (THE WALKING DEAD, 2012)

The group of survivors who make up Telltale Games' first visit to the world of *The Walking Dead* are a very special bunch. You'll be hard pressed to find a more well-rounded, utterly human group of videogame characters in the history of the industry. Their personal motivations, attitudes and reactions to your choices all feel genuine, sometimes painfully so.



THE PHANTOM THIEVES OF HEARTS (PERSONA 5, 2017)

Formed as a means to bypass the law and take revenge on corrupt and criminal adults who have ruined their lives, the Phantom Thieves attempt to steal the 'corrupt hearts' of their targets and are the primary protagonists of *Persona 5*. In recent memory, this is one of the best teams of characters we've seen with a wonderful mix of personalities and histories to explore.



■ Logitech's Lightspeed wireless technology claims to be as fast – or faster – as using a dedicated wired gaming mouse.

■ The PowerCore module attaches magnetically to your mouse and charges it while it's being used on the PowerPlay pad.

■ The PowerPlay system works with Logitech's G703 wireless gaming mouse, which is available for £99.99

■ Logitech's G903 wireless gaming mouse is PowerPlay compatible and costs £149.99.

■ The PowerPlay comes with a choice of both hard and cloth mouse gaming pads to suit the way you use your PC.

POWERPLAY WIRELESS CHARGING SYSTEM

MANUFACTURER: **LOGITECH** PRICE: **£109.99**

LOGITECH HAS JUST CHANGED THE GAME. It isn't a particularly important game – like, this is serious first-world-problem territory – but for those of you lamenting the amount of rechargeable devices in your possession, the PowerPlay wireless charging pad could just completely change the way in which you think about your PC gaming habits and rituals. This is, essentially, the first wireless charging solution that is more of a help than a hindrance – letting you enjoy the convenience of wireless technology without the hassle of tracking battery levels and rogue cables underneath your desktop.

The PowerPlay does this by turning the entire surface of the mouse mat, into a charging station – if your mouse is on the pad, it'll be charging, which means that you never need worry about the mouse running out of juice part way through a game or any other occasion; so long as it is on the mouse mat, even if it is in motion, it'll be charging up and ready to go. What's interesting to see is how Logitech has also integrated the wireless receiver directly into the unit. Wireless disconnects and input lag aren't something you're likely to experience with this smart setup.

The only stickler at this point could indeed be the price of entry. While it'll cost you £109.99 to get the pad, you'll also need to get yourself one of two compatible mice. That includes the Logitech G903 or the G703, both slightly modified variations of the G900 and G403, respectively.

But all told, this is an extremely useful addition to your set-up, one that essentially removes the last major hurdle of going fully wireless.

www.logitech.com/en-gb



GAMING CLOTHING



DESTINY IS IN THY HANDS

The D20 dice has decided many a fate, and now this premium hoodie from GameTee will give you the opportunity to show off your love of tabletop gaming in a stylish and low-key fashion.
gametee.co.uk



DUNGEON CRAWLERS SOCIAL CLUB

With a deep cowl hood and dice-black colouring, this Dungeon Crawler Social Club zip hoodie is the perfect accompaniment to any evening of tabletop gaming. Get your group into these and bring your guild from fantasy to reality.
gametee.co.uk



RICK AND MORTY NES CARTRIDGE

Okay, so we need this game to happen. Get this shirt out in the public and hopefully one pixel-art aficionado game designer will see it, get inspired and make our dreams come true.
Teepublic.com



The XO Three comes with Windows Sonic for Headphones tech.

TURTLE BEACH: XO THREE

SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£49.99**

While the XO Three is essentially the Xbox equivalent of the Recon 150, it does come with a handful of extra features that are worth pointing out to any of your perspective buyers and PC owners. The XO Three also takes advantage of Windows Sonic for Headphones technology, meaning that this affordable set of cans is also surround sound ready on your Xbox One and compatible Windows 10 PCs. Combine that with high comfort and a responsive in-line microphone and you're looking at a pretty good deal here.
Turtlebeach.com

TURTLE BEACH: RECON 150

SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£49.99**

Designed to enhance play on your PS4 and PS4 Pro, the Turtle Beach: Recon 150 is an affordable entry point into better and more sophisticated gaming audio. With a robust frame (meaning it won't break when you reel back in horror upon getting destroyed online and drop them) and packing large 50mm over-ear speakers for pretty solid lows and bass, you should get a small advantage on enemy detection for those that enjoy a good multiplayer shooter.
Turtlebeach.com



These Recon 150 headphones come with 50mm over-ear speakers for solid lows and bass.





RIVAL 310

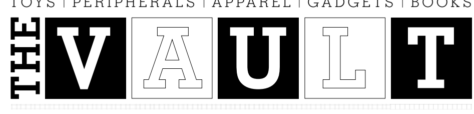
SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£59.99**

SteelSeries has been pushing for absolute dominance over the eSports market for a number of years now, but it's with the Rival 310 that it looks like that dream could become a reality. At just 88g in weight, it's incredibly comfortable to use, while the custom sensor – tracking movement at 3500DPI – ensures that this right-handed mouse is perfectly placed to deliver on all of your competitive gaming needs.
SteelSeries.com

SENSEI 310

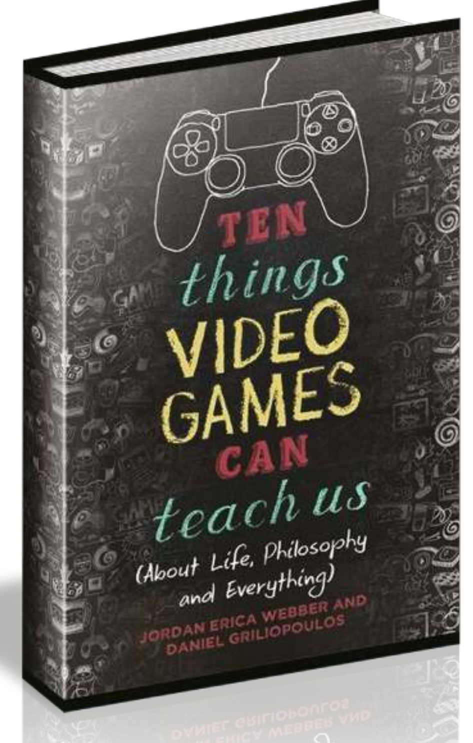
SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£59.99**

The Sensei 310 is being pitched as the definitive mouse for competitive gaming, boasting a custom sensor that's supposed to deliver true 1:1 tracking at 3500DPI. That's a lot of technical talk to essentially say that wherever your hand goes (and under any conditions), the cursor will go with it with absolute clarity. With no jitter and input lag, this ambidextrous wired mouse is pretty fantastic, and in at a relatively affordable entry bracket.
SteelSeries.com



TEN THINGS VIDEO GAMES CAN TEACH US (ABOUT LIFE, PHILOSOPHY AND EVERYTHING)

PUBLISHER: **LITTLE BROWN**



AS GAMING CONTINUES TO GROW AND MATURE AS A MEDIUM SO TO WILL THE LENS IN WHICH WE USE TO VIEW, CRITIQUE AND UNDERSTAND IT. *Ten Things Video Games Can Teach Us*, co-written by authors Jordan Erica Webber and Daniel Griliopoulos – and, full disclosure: both of whom have freelanced for **games™** in the past – is a unique insight into the culture that surrounds videogames and the work that is being produced within the industry.

Across its ten chapters, Webber and Griliopoulos present questions that have sparked debate between students of philosophy for years, channelling them through the prism of videogames. Taking moral and cultural quandaries and exploring them through discussion of relevant videogames; using VR to explore the idea of mass market hallucinations, the nature of free will through games such as *Portal 2* and *Deus Ex*, and questions of utilitarianism in *BioShock* and *Harvest Moon*. The results are often fascinating, although you may not like or necessarily agree with the conclusions that are drawn – such is the pitfall of philosophy and more complex discussion.

But that's the joy of reading through a work such as this. It allows you to explore complex philosophical questions through videogames that you know, love and understand; it's a link between worlds, opening your eyes to a different way to approach and consider your favourite games. If this is your first interaction with work like this you might find it a little difficult to parse at times, but those that make it through will find a genuinely insightful and delicately crafted thought experiment. Videogames are evolving, so to must our way of exploring them – *Ten Things* is one hell of a start.

littlebrown.co.uk





MINECRAFT: GUIDE TO EXPLORATION

This official guide is designed to give would-be *Minecraft* builders an in-depth overview of the basics. Crafting equipment, hunting for resources, and getting yourself prepared for hostile mobs. It's a fun and easy to parse group of tips from the experts at developer Mojang.

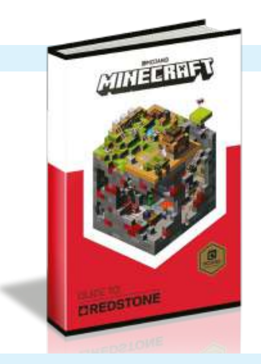
Egmont.co.uk



MINECRAFT: GUIDE TO THE NETHER & THE END

By the time you gett to The Nether and The End in *Minecraft* you'll feel pretty confident about your chances of survival. But this Minecraft Guide takes chance out of the equation, teaching you how to navigate alien terrain, find rare items and survive the dangers that exist within.

Egmont.co.uk



MINECRAFT: GUIDE TO REDSTONE

To become a *Minecraft* master, you need to get to grips with Redstone. This rare resource can be used to complete some of the best builds in the game, and this official guide details the intricacies of circuitry and other Redstone components to assist you in your ambitions.

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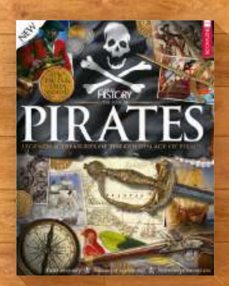
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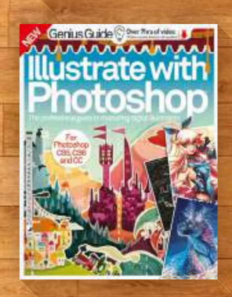




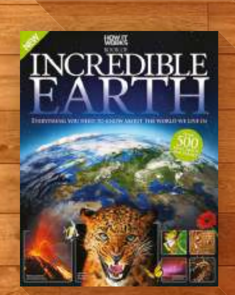












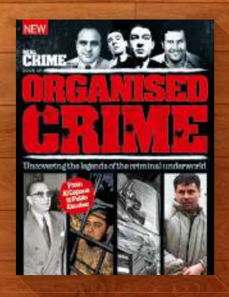


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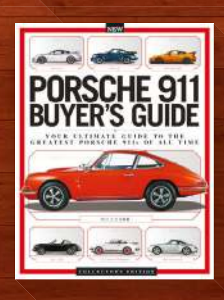













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